Magnum Opus

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/9799721.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Hannibal (TV)
Relationships:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter, Will Graham & Hannibal Lecter, Will Graham/Abigail Hobbs
Characters:	Will Graham, Hannibal Lecter, Jack Crawford, Bedelia Du Maurier, Abigail Hobbs, Alana Bloom, Freddie Lounds, Dr. Frederick Chilton, Beverly Katz, Will Graham's Father, Nicholas Boyle, Marissa Schurr
Additional Tags:	Slow Burn, Psychologists & Psychiatrists, Romance, Murder Mystery, Power Dynamics, Cannibalism, Possessive Hannibal, Someone Help Will Graham, Dark, Obsession, Psychological Trauma, Hannigram - Freeform, Murder Husbands, When I say slow burn it's a slow burn saddle up yall, Hannibal is a Cannibal, Young Will processing being Will, Journey of Will Graham, Age Difference, about 6 years or so I think, university Hannibal, High School Will Graham
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of Magnum Opus
Stats:	Published: 2017-02-17 Completed: 2017-07-15 Words: 110,840 Chapters: 26/26

Magnum Opus

by LiaS0

Summary

When Jared Freeman walked into Will Graham's high school and murdered their teacher, Will thought that his life was officially over. Haunted by dreams, remnants of the madness hooking into his skin, he finds himself turning to a student at George Washington University that claims to have insight into just what is going on inside of his mind.

Hannibal Lecter, up to his elbows in his final year of grad school, doesn't think he can cure Will Graham of his hyper-empathy, but he certainly can use him to finalize his thesis on the disorder. As long as Will Graham doesn't know the difference, everything should work out in the end.

Slowburn, murder, mystery, mayhem, cannibalism, romance, age-difference

Chapter 1

Chapter 1:

It was an average high school. It was decently respectable, 4-A, and test scores were rising every year. The grounds were moderately kept and dipped into various fields for soccer, football, and track, and even the art department received livable funding. The grass was regularly trimmed, and an early fall breeze swept through immaculately pruned river birch trees. Leaves trembled but did not yet fall; summer clung to September in Georgia, and it wouldn't feel like fall until late October.

Within the brick walls, cheap tile floors were scuffed and aged with thousands of shoes whose tread held the miles and struggles of the adolescent students that walked the halls on a daily basis. The cafeteria tables had already been folded and put away; it was approximately 2:13 P.M., and the air reeked of stale pizza and what cooks questionably labeled 'ranch dressing'.

I held the gun, and my hand shook. It was as unfamiliar to me as a manual transmission –I knew the general pieces and how they moved together, but I could hardly drive one. While the car would ultimately stall though, the gun's safety was off and a bullet rested in the chamber. At this distance, I wouldn't miss. I couldn't miss. It was the only way that we could be together, and I was out of options.

"You don't have to do this," she says, sounding far younger than her twenty-eight years. Tears rim her eyes, and her lips tremble with the effort to not cry. It hurts, it aches, and I long to end her pain. I let out a breath, ribs groaning, and I smile at her, to better comfort her. I will end her pain. I will end it all. We will be together forever, locked in an eternal embrace that will span the ages beyond when our miserable planet collapses in the implosion of our steadily decaying star.

This is my design.

I look away from her, a glance about to those that cower and hold themselves underneath desks with blubbering mouths and hushed whispers of prayers. There is one that doesn't rock back and forth beneath the metal and crudely formed plastic, though. He watches me, and I meet his stare as I deliberately wink and smile. He doesn't smile back, but of course he doesn't because he is Will, and Will wouldn't smile so wide at a killer. I look down at my hands, but suddenly they aren't Jared Freeman's hands, they're Will Graham's hands, and this is a terrible mistake.

Will sucked in a breath and exhaled sharply, stumbling back to reality with a lurching halt that gripped his stomach and held it unmercifully. His breath hesitated, then trembled, and he struggled to blink the blood out of his eyes. He didn't reach up to wipe it away; another heartbeat took him from the classroom and back to the counseling hall where concerned parents led crying children away to safety. There was no blood on him –there was

no brain matter. He was not Jared Freeman who'd just shot their teacher before definitively blowing his brains out. He was Will Graham, an unfortunate witness to an unfortunate scene.

"Leslie?" The girl sitting across from him rose and walked into the counselor's office whose doors were flanked by two FBI agents. Blood dotted up her pant leg, and something questionable clung to her ear lobe. A bit of skull? A small chunk of skin? It didn't matter. Will wouldn't tell her, not when his own breathing was interrupted periodically by terror that parted his ribs to squeeze his heart.

The agents surveyed the hall before closing the door behind them, leaving Will in the silence of being the last to be interviewed. One of the students had an anxiety attack so horrific that they were excused from questioning, but the rest of them were rounded up by men with fancy badges who slowly but surely worked their way down the list, wanting to know every detail about the late Jared Freeman. He wasn't sure if it was normal for the FBI to be involved in school shootings, but he was fortunate enough to not care, either.

Will exhaled the stench of wet pennies and studied the gun in his hand. It was heavy, bulky for someone his size and stature, and his hand trembled as he held it aloft. *Now we can be together*, he thought with a smile. *We don't have to hide anymore, it's alright. You told me there is no chance in this life that we could be together. Darling, I've made us a better life instead. Stop weeping; why are you weeping? Are they tears of joy? They must be, for I've found a way that means we never have to suffer without one another. This is my design.*

"Lost in your head?" A voice startled Will from his reverie, and he looked away from his empty hands to see a boy sitting across from him. No, no, boy was the wrong word – young man was better. He had to be mid-twenties with dark blonde hair and hazel eyes flecked with gold. When had he gotten there? How long had Will been wrapped in his own mind? He stared at Will unabashedly, and Will looked away when a girl down the hall let out a particularly loud wail. When it subsided to muted sobs, he looked back to the starched burgundy dress shirt instead of the face that made no attempt to hide its interest.

"Just waiting for my turn," he rasped out after a moment. Words were difficult; words with strangers were harder.

"You were in the classroom when it happened; did you know him well?" His accent was heavy, European, and rich. Will wrinkled his nose.

"Do I know you?" he asked.

"Forgive me, I'm Hannibal Lecter. What is your name?" Will hesitated, studying the impeccable wing-tip oxford shoes and pressed trousers. He'd never seen someone so young sit so confidently, as though they owned the chair beneath them and the hall it resided in. Was he part of the FBI? Did they let someone so young into such an established place of work?

"Will Graham," Will replied, and he swallowed heavily. The man attempted to catch his eye, and he looked away. Eyes were difficult –too much, too little, and they left him dizzy from either an overwhelming sense of *knowing* or an overwhelming sense of dread.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Will. May I ask where your mind was?” Hannibal tilted his head slightly, and he clasped his hands in his lap. “You seemed rather far away.”

“I was right here.”

“You didn’t appear to be. I sat here for several moments without an acknowledgement.”

“Maybe I didn’t want to acknowledge you,” Will retorted.

“I don’t think you’d have acknowledged anyone that walked down this hall with the fortress you’d built in your mind at that moment.”

“Is that some kind of problem?”

“I only wondered what it was in that fortress you were facing. Sometimes we build walls to protect ourselves, but sometimes we accidently enclose the monster inside with us.” Will didn’t have anything to say to that. He looked at his hands –still not holding any sort of gun –then back to Hannibal whose head tilted the other way, watching his every move. Will had the distinct impression of a hawk observing its prey.

“What are you doing here?” Will asked after a moment.

“I am a grad student in my final year of school at George Washington University. I’m currently shadowing Dr. Du Maurier while she works with the FBI on this unfortunate case.” He gestured slightly, palms out, as if to say *so there we have it*.

“The FBI lets grad students tag along?” Will asked dubiously.

“They do in cases such as this. They thought that I could be an asset.”

“What sort of case is this? It seems pretty cut and dry to me,” Will said, glancing to the man’s mouth, then over his shoulder. Hannibal’s mouth twitched into a smile, a deliberate curve of his lips.

“Is it?”

“He wanted to be with her, so he killed her, then himself. What more is there to understand?” The words were garbled in his mouth, not so cut and dry as he’d have liked. He thought of Jared’s wink and shuddered, looking down to his hands. Still no gun. There was never a gun. He wasn’t Jared, he was Will.

“They’re rather thorough, the FBI. I’m certain they only want to ensure all rocks are overturned.” Hannibal sat forward, and Will felt his gaze sweeping over his worn dockers, khaki corduroys, and shabby flannel, analyzing. “Now to my original question; did you know him well?”

“Not well enough,” Will retorted, and he was exposed as Hannibal’s eyes crept up Will’s neck and paused on his face.

“That is a powerful expression. ‘Not well enough’,” Hannibal quoted, and he smiled. “It says more than anyone else could have said with time and enough words to fill books. You’re a man of few words, Will, but you are careful to use them wisely.”

“Thanks,” Will replied sarcastically.

“I wonder, though: when you went to the fortress your mind turned to, were you hiding beneath a desk, or were you the one holding the gun?”

“Are you psychoanalyzing me?” Will demanded.

“Do you feel psychoanalyzed?” Hannibal asked.

The door beside Will opened before he had a chance to reply, although it wouldn’t have been an entirely polite reply. He looked to Leslie who tumbled from the room, dazed. Her eyes were red-rimmed from crying, and the questionable matter had been removed from her ear, much to Will’s relief. She looked about, paused on Will, then turned, heading down the hall to the churning mass of bodies to find her way to freedom. The crowd enveloped her like the wings of a great beast, swallowing her up.

“Will?” The school counselor beckoned him and he stood, glancing across to the college student who stood as well, head and shoulders above him.

“Shall we?” Hannibal gestured to the door, and Will walked through it, ignoring the agents that moved about the room with short, irritated strides.

“Have a seat,” Mrs. Turner said, gesturing to the plush chair. She was a graying woman of late sixties whose wrinkles folded delicately over jaw, cheek, and chin. Her gaze was maternal, and although she gave very little in the way of true counseling, she was quick to choose classes that set students on the right track to graduation, which is why she was kept around. That, and she had tenure.

Will sat down, hyperaware of the two agents that perused over files as they walked about, Mrs. Turner who sat on the couch beside an attractive, professional-looking woman, Hannibal who stood nearby the couch, and a man who eased himself into the chair across from Will. The one across from him was not as old as he first appeared to be. Mild scars were hidden in the beginning signs of wrinkles, and the indents near his eyes lay claim to stress being the real cause of his older appearance. His salt-and-pepper hair was cut short, although the hints of five o’clock shadow haunted his jaw. He assessed Will and frowned impressively, gaze as cunning as a fox. Will sat in a den of carnivores.

“How are you doing, son?” he asked. He rested his hands on the desk that separated them, but the chasm wasn’t far enough apart for Will’s taste. Everything was close; far too close.

“Thirsty,” Will replied. A paper cup was produced, followed by tap water from the fountain in the hall, and it was set before him like a chalice. Will gulped it down greedily, palms clammy.

“You look nervous,” the man said. “Are you nervous?”

“No,” Will said, but it was a lie. It was a good lie though, the sort you tell yourself so that you can soldier on. The man chewed his words around before he grunted, fox eyes glinting as he searched for a weakness. Will slumped into the back of his chair and avoided his gaze, acutely aware of everyone staring.

“Will, my name is Jack Crawford of the FBI. With me are Agent Zeller and Agent Price, as well as Special Agent Dr. Du Maurier and Mr. Lecter.” Will glanced about as the appropriate names were listed off, but his eyes didn’t stick to anything. They roved, roamed, and he found his way back to the nick in the desk from when something heavy had fallen on it.

“We’re here to talk to you about Jared Freeman. We understand you had several classes with him?”

“Yes,” Will said.

“Did you speak with him often?” Jack asked.

“Yes.”

“Did you socialize with him after school at all?”

“Only for school projects that we were assigned to.”

“So he never spent time with you outside of school or school work?” Jack pressed.

“No,” Will said with a frown.

“Did you notice him behaving strangely at all recently?”

“Am I being interrogated?” Will glanced up, then to the side where Mrs. Turner sat, poised but ultimately unhelpful.

“No, we’re just having a conversation,” Jack replied, easing back in his chair. “I’m just trying to get a feel for what we’re dealing with here, and whatever help you could give would be great.”

“I didn’t know what he was planning,” Will said after a moment, holding onto the paper cup for dear life. “If I knew, I’d have said something.”

“Do you know why he would have attacked your teacher?” The voice to the side grabbed his attention and stuck. He turned his head to the woman whose posture and clothing looked as though she’d just stepped from a magazine cover of “Psychiatrists Weekly”. Her perfectly coiffed hair lay along one shoulder delicately, and her perfectly controlled smile seemed as fragile as glass. A smart pencil skirt and delicate silk top were fitted with precision, and the small daubs of jewelry were made to be worn by her. Will envied the sort of grace and comfort she had within her own body.

“I wouldn’t call it an attack,” he said after a moment. She tilted her head and seemed to find his answer as amusing as Hannibal had outside.

“What would you call it?” she asked.

“Attack implies he jumped on her and used his bare hands to kill her. He shot her, laid beside her, then shot himself in the face,” Will said, and he looked down as a stone lodged itself in his throat and stuck, threatening mutiny. He crushed the paper cup in his hand without thinking, and all he could see was the blood, blood, blood. The human body contained far too much blood.

“I’m sorry for your loss, Will,” Dr. Du Maurier said gently. Will continued to glare at the paper cup, but it couldn’t uncrush itself. Slowly, deliberately, he began smoothing it out, fingers easing over the ridges and bends.

“How close were you to your teacher?” Jack asked.

“She’s been my teacher for four years now,” Will replied, not looking up.

“She was the one that first had you tested for…autism?” Jack glanced to the side and looked at a piece of paper, verifying. “It says you fall somewhere on the spectrum, high-functioning it seems, which is why you are in her class. She taught speech and social interactions?”

“Yes,” Will said.

“What was Jared in her class for?” Jack asked.

“He had ADHD, intermittent explosive disorder, and a stunted reading level,” Will replied.

“And you’re sure he never mentioned anything about wanting to hurt Miss Avery?” Jack pressed. “He didn’t hate her?”

“Of course he didn’t hate her,” Will said impatiently, “he loved her.”

“He loved her?” Dr. Du Maurier said in the quiet that followed. Will was sensitive to the sound of silences. Some were heavy, burdened with words one wanted to say. Some were hushed, reverent in the face of beauty or inner contemplation. Some were shocked, much the way there was shock when Jared first walked into the classroom and leveled a gun at them. This one was an off, muffled sort of silence, dumbfounded but intrigued. Will set down the cup and adjusted the collar on his shirt, stifled.

“He was in love with her,” Will said, exhaling shakily. “He said he wanted to be with her, but she couldn’t love him back because he was too young.”

“Did he say this to you?” Jack asked.

“Yes.”

“Did he ever express his affection for Miss Avery to her?” Du Maurier inquired.

“I don’t think so. He’s had a crush on her for years, though,” Will replied, and he rubbed his face, sliding hands underneath his glasses to press his palms to his eyelids. God, he just wanted to go home; every muscle ached from holding so still, from counting the seconds. He couldn’t be of any help in this. He was stretched out like taffy, left to hang on a metal hook.

“So he had a crush on her, grew angry that they weren’t together, then shoots her to punish her,” Jack stated, but he wasn’t talking to Will. His voice carried to the other agents in the room, and as Will blinked bursts of light from his gaze, he frowned.

“He killed her so that they could be together,” he snapped. “He knew they couldn’t be together in this world, so he made a new world instead.”

Another silence, this one dangerous. Electricity crackled, and Jack turned his head from the agent he was speaking with; his eyes glinted, marking his prey.

“When did he say that to you?” he asked, dangerously quiet.

“H-he didn’t have to,” Will scrambled to form his words, heart pounding.

“Then how would you know that?” Jack’s voice lowered to a steady rumble of thunder.

“Couldn’t…couldn’t you see it? He laid down…he laid down beside her before he shot himself,” Will said, and his voice wavered. His clammy palms pressed to his jeans, and he looked about the room for someone to take the pressure of Jack Crawford’s gaze off of him. Beside the couch, still standing, he found Hannibal watching with the most peculiar expression on his face that Will had ever seen. He appraised Will, from his too faded shirt to his too rumpled jeans, and he smiled slightly.

“You saw him lay down beside her before he took his own life?” Du Maurier asked. Will looked to her and nodded.

“He shot her, he sighed like a weight had fallen off of him, and he laid down and shot himself in the head,” Will said. He looked back to Jack, earnest. “He wanted to be with her forever, so he made a forever where it could be.”

No one spoke, and out of the corner of his eye Will saw Mrs. Turner dabbing tears from her eyes. It was not for romance she cried, but for the waste of life, the senseless death. Will blinked, and he could see the blood spreading, reaching, grasping. In his hands he held an instrument of death, but also an instrument of life, of change and creation. He could not change this, but he could create. He could begin anew. The gun was cold, but the blood was warm as he lay down in it, and it was with a smile that he put the gun into his mouth and pulled the trigger.

“School is cancelled, as well as activities for an undetermined amount of time. We’ll have you fill out some paperwork, but you’re free to go,” Jack said, and Will nodded,

blinking the gun from his hands, the blood, the death, the change. He looked up at the man before him and nodded with more emphasis, his breath rattling.

"Thank you," he said, and he sat forward to take a pen from Jack's outstretched hand.

"We appreciate your insight and you telling us what you remember. If we have any other questions, we'll give you a call or stop by," Jack said, and he stood from the desk, stretching as though he'd just run a mile. Will felt like he'd run ten miles, on trial for something he knew nothing about.

That wasn't entirely true, though. Even without knowing, somehow he knew.

He filled out the papers quickly, pen scratching on cheap printer paper before he excused himself, clutching his messenger bag for dear life. Now he knew why Leslie all but stumbled from the room, dazed and disoriented. Had her interrogation been just as grueling? Had they peeled back the layers of her skin to see the muscle beneath?

"Will Graham." A voice startled him, and Will inhaled a yelp, almost dropping his books on the floor. He looked about, and with a start he realized he'd somehow made it to his locker in his haste to escape, the time between leaving and arriving a blur. Hannibal stood by the locker, hands clasped behind his back and expression placid as Will stuffed his things into his bag, head down.

"You were in a fortress again," Hannibal said, and Will glared.

"The FBI agent said that I was free to go," he snapped.

"Oh yes, you are. You appeared rattled though, so I sought to ensure that you left school safely. Do you have transport home?"

"I have a car," Will said, slamming his locker shut. Hannibal didn't flinch at the noise or seem to note its existence. When Will turned to walk away, he followed, steps sure and leisurely.

"I listened to twelve other interviews today, and none of them were as insightful as yours. Were you being honest?"

"Of course," Will bit out.

"You saw more about Jared Freeman than any other student, and while they wept and took far too long to speak, you concisely delivered information that absolved you of any crime and revealed much about the attacker."

"Why are you following me?" Will snapped, taking a turn at a hall that wouldn't have so many students.

"Because I am working on my thesis, Will, and what I believe I saw both in the hallway and in the counselor's office was you quite literally placing yourself in the head of Jared Freeman and seeing the world as he did."

That stopped Will in his tracks. Prey was flight or fight, his father once said, but no one ever broached the topic of prey that froze. Every inch of his skin was frozen, too stiff to move, too afraid to bend. Hannibal circled him, moving to stand directly before him, and Will looked up, jaw clenched against his own inability to save himself.

"I have several theories on those who are able to empathize so completely with another human being that their will and identity completely meld together," Hannibal said, unconcerned with Will's adrenaline that suspended him in time. "It is part of my research though, and I would like to request that you meet me at a later time to study it further."

"No," Will said, barely a murmur.

"Are you afraid?" Hannibal asked, and underneath his question there was humor, the sort that smarted in its mockery. Slowly, deliberately, he lifted a hand and grabbed Will's glasses, adjusting and sliding them until they rested correctly on the bridge of his nose rather than askew and halfway down. Will held his breath, exhaling only when Hannibal lowered his arm.

"No," said Will, another lie.

"Then why do you look so afraid?"

"…I don't want to help you study anything," Will said after he trusted his voice.

"Why not?" Hannibal asked. Will ground his teeth, gritted them, and made a show of skirting around him, heading towards the double doors to freedom.

"I don't find you that interesting," he said over his shoulder. He didn't hear Hannibal's words until he was throwing the doors to sunlight open, the heat and humidity of the Georgia day gracing his cheeks and welcoming him to the pseudo-happy exterior of the school. By then it was too late to reply, and even if he could have, Will most certainly didn't want to.

"Don't worry," Hannibal said, "you will."

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

> Thank you for all of the kudos/bookmarks/hits/comments! I'm planning on making this a once a week sort of update to give myself time to write the chapter/edit/tweak it all, so hopefully this will be a steady update instead of my normal sporadic mess for other works. I'm absolutely in love with these characters, so I can only hope that I do them justice. I'm trying to imagine them as younger, less way-of-the-worldly as they are in the series, and I hope that I can capture that. Enjoy, lovelies!

Chapter 2:

Mike's Mufflers was owned by a man named Steve who employed teenagers to avoid having to pay them meaningful wages. It was the only job out there that Will was not only good at, but one he also enjoyed. His father worked in a shipyard an hour out of town, and it'd been the steadiest job he'd ever held. Four years was a long time for a Graham, long enough that he'd enjoyed most of his high school years in the same school for once rather than moving about as they'd done when he was younger. At sixteen, he'd stood in front of Steve and explained his background with his father in mechanics. The man ho'd, hmm'd, swirled his chew in his mouth, then spat it out on the concrete, wiping the trail off of his gristly beard.

"I'll hire yeh," he decided, taking a sip of coke.

It was minimum wage, but after enough hard work, Will would receive tips from regulars, as well as gift cards and birthday presents from those whose cars were constantly shutting down. After school took him to fixing Mrs. Hanson's carburetor, the mechanical and habitual manner allowing him to rest his mind and take himself out of it for awhile. Working on cars was a lot like washing dishes or taking out the trash –the repetition made it easy.

After work took him home where he found his father sitting on the couch, watching ESPN with a TV dinner on his lap. That was also a habit of four years, one Will could handle. Real food was nice, but it wasn't as cheap as a jumbo box of Hungry Man dinner trays from BJ's. His father eyed Will, then stuffed potatoes into his mouth. Beside his food, a few opened and empty beer cans rested, attesting to a hard day at work and a nice buzz to help cope with it.

"How's Georgia?" Will asked.

"Focusing on fixing defense, but that won't change shit," he said around the food. Will grunted in agreement, tossing his messenger bag onto a chair and setting a fifty on the

coffee table. He didn't have to look to know his father tracked the movement, noting the silent offer of money.

"Got a call from the school while I was at work," his dad continued, turning down the TV a couple of notches. Will shifted his stance, looked about, then headed into the kitchenette adjoining the living room.

"Sorry if they made your boss mad," Will said, back turned. "What's for dinner?"

"Salisbury steak with potatoes and peas," his dad replied, and the couch groaned as he stood and walked towards Will. The sports reporter behind him contemplated the new tight end for UGA, but the details were garbled by the blood beginning to pump in Will's ears.

"Dinner of champions," Will muttered, grabbing it from the freezer.

"Were you going to tell me you were almost killed today, or were you going to wait for the news to tell me?" His father leaned on the counter, watching Will rip open the cardboard and stab the seal a few times so that it could vent.

"It wasn't me he was trying to kill," Will hedged.

"You were in the god damn room, son!" he thundered, and Will cringed at the noise. "You were ten feet away from a gun, and you went to work afterwards instead of calling me to tell me that you're okay!"

"I'm okay," Will said hurriedly, but his father shook his head.

"Let me, let me do that, you…god dammit," he muttered, shambling around the counter and grabbing the dinner from Will's hands. He tossed it into the microwave and pressed a few buttons, scowling impressively at the window as it lit up and the meal began to turn. "Sit down and let me do that."

Will sat, teeth worrying over his bottom lip as his dad paced the small kitchen, three steps taking him from one end to the other. "We need the money, dad. I just…wanted to make rent."

"You shouldn't work just so we can make rent, you should…you should play football, join the debate team, have *friends*," he emphasized the last part, glancing to Will pointedly.

"I don't want to play football," Will protested.

"Friends? Debate team?" his father prompted.

"Just thinking about the debate team makes me anxious, really, I-" Will sighed, rubbing his forehead where a headache had been building for the past few hours. "I just…I'm fine as I am. We needed rent money, so I got it."

"You're too young to worry about working to live," his dad snapped.

"I'm eighteen years old."

“That’s not-” he stopped, scowling. “I just…I don’t want that burden on you.”

“I got tipped fifty for my work today; I put it on the coffee table.”

“I’m looking at new jobs. That call, you not coming home, no call, no nothin’-”

“You don’t have to find a new job just because of that,” Will said with an adamant shake of his head.

“-and I just…your mother, when she up and left, she just did a number on us, kid, and I’d always worried you’d had some of that in you, just running when it got bad.” At the mention of his mother, Will knew not to speak. He had no memory of her, only a poor man’s dream of a woman who left when she should have stayed and dumped a child on a man whose hands were only good at rough, manual labor. Talks about mother were shared through scathing remarks. Talks about mother were done over ten beers and a trip down memory lane. Talks about mother were the sort of thing that nestled deep into Will’s brain and woke him with dreams of a time he never knew because it wasn’t his own to remember. He stared at the cheap linoleum tabletop and nodded slowly. His father let the silence hang, suspended over them like a guillotine before he let out a slow, uneven sigh.

“I don’t…I don’t think you’ll up and leave, that wasn’t fair. I just…I got so scared, kid; I mean, Jesus, Will, are you okay? Really, are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Will said, and his father was the sort of man that couldn’t see such a blatant lie, even presented so awfully before him.

“I want you to have a good senior year, something you can look back on and smile at.”

“Other seniors work too,” Will pointed out.

“Yeah, but they-” he stopped when the microwave beeped, and he turned, grabbing the meat and flipping it before tossing it back into the microwave and turning it on again. “You should…take some time. School is closed for the rest of the week, and they want all of you to have access to psychiatrists, therapists, counselors, whatever-the-hell they call them. They said the school is paying for it, and they’re mostly concerned about your class.”

“I don’t need to see a doctor,” Will said, clasping his hands tightly in his lap. The sound of his own blood in his ears was distracting, the sort of noise that crawled in and drowned everything out. He thought of Hannibal and Dr. Du Maurier, and he shuddered. Surely they wouldn’t be the ones trying to talk to him.

“You do, son. You saw a woman get murdered and a boy kill himself, and I want you to see a doctor to make sure your head’s not on wrong.” The microwave dinged again, and he grabbed the meal, tossing it in front of Will with a fork and a knife.

“I don’t need a knife,” Will said.

“The steak’s tough as hell,” his dad replied. “I mean it, Will. You don’t have to go forever, just…you got all week with no school, and it’ll ease my mind to know you’re going to see someone that can help you.”

“Since I’m eighteen, I really don’t have to do what you tell me,” Will said, petulant. He sawed into the thing that was questionably meat, stopped halfway and rolled it up instead, taking a large bite of it. It was tough as hell, as his dad had warned.

“Since you’re my son, you’re going to help me sleep at night and go tomorrow. I already set up the appointment, so you’re not getting out of this. I don’t put my foot down much, but I’m putting it down here.”

Will wanted to keep fighting, but when he looked up at his father, he stopped. His father wasn’t a burly man, but he was a big man. Years of manual labor bent his shoulders down, and his lips were turned into a permanent frown. Sun exposure leathered his skin, and wrinkles from hard times dug in with furious grooves. His clothes were just as shabby and worn as Will’s, and there was a scar on his neck from a work accident that almost killed him in Biloxi. Will’s gaze roamed to his eyes, blue much like his own. He saw eons of work, toil, anguish, and stress, beaten in underneath heavy eyelids and a deep-set brow. He exhaled a sharp cough and looked back to his food, nodding his defeat.

“The dinner of champions,” he said, motioning to the potatoes. His dad lifted a hand, whether to smack him on the back of the head or to pat his shoulder, he couldn’t say. Either way, it froze midair and held, wavering. A heartbeat, then two before it flopped back to his side, and Will Graham’s father sidled back to the living room, the volume on the TV rising until it could drown out the sound of occasional grunts, sighs, and groans from couch and man alike.

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Her hair is sunlight wrapped in strands of silk, twisted into the perfect bun and accented with a simple hairclip. She has strong cheekbones, the kind angels were recorded as owning, and her nose is cute and pert. She is the sort of girl to be accosted in the grocery store as stealing the hearts of men and women, and every curve of her body was meant to be worshipped, loved.

She bends over a desk to help one of the others in the room, a child with dyslexia. I stare, I sigh, I inhale and hold my breath to better keep her close. Every moment is beautiful, a piece of a puzzle whose whole holds the entire world. She is Pandora’s Box, and I want to unleash her insides over me. Can she see me in my entirety? Her gentle, caressing hands glide across their unthankful shoulder, and she moves on. They don’t see her as I do, which is fine with me. I don’t know what I’d do if anyone tried to see her as I did. I am not the sort to share.

“You did well managing your anger when lunches were running late,” she says, and I can only stare, only hope, only dream.

“I want to worship you,” I say, and she shakes her head, severe.

"You know we don't talk like that," she says, denying me. I start to accept her denial; I accept that I am not enough. But I am enough, I'm more than enough, and I scream, lifting the desk and turning it end over end over end, darkness seeping from my pores as I grab her. She stares at the ichor bleeding from me, and she screams as it stains her skin.

"See?" I hiss, shaking her, "can't you see?"

She cries, eyes closed to me, shut tight against my feelings. Aren't I valid? Aren't I important? I shake her harder, and when she won't open her eyes to finally see me, I stab my thumbs into her eyelids, the sclera parting and turning to mush. She screams –how she screams! I press her against the wall, pushing, pushing, dying to crawl inside of her, dying to see what her mind looks like painted across my lips, my own screams crawling over hers and strangling even that until we are one piece of a whole, a masterpiece created by me. This is my design.

"No, no!" Will lurched from his bed, fingers scraping over his sweat-soaked shirt, heart screaming in his throat to escape. He twisted, caught in the embrace of a body whose arms tangled around his torso, grabbing at him with grasping, greedy claws. Blood trailed down his back, his arms, his neck, the stench pressed against his nose nauseatingly.

"No, no, no, no, *no,*" he stammered, and he all but flipped, falling from the bed and hitting the floor with a heavy, unforgiving *thud*. The corpse followed, hungry for him, hungry to meld against him, to become one. The sudden, sharp pain in his back and neck jolted the form of a dead woman from his panicked stare and scattered the feeling of her mutilated eyes from his fingertips, leaving him with nothing but an empty bedroom with poor heat circulation. Will panted, chest heaving with the effort to get his breath back, and out of the corner of his eye his alarm clock showed the time. 2:13 A.M. Rather, it showed the numbers upside down, as his head and neck were pressed uncomfortably against the floor of his bedroom.

"Ah," he exhaled painfully, carefully extracting himself from his comforter. Legs flailed and fumbled, and Will righted himself with painstaking movements, heart trembling with the fragility of moth's wings. Fingers grasped and discarded his soaking wet t-shirt, and when his legs could once again move, he lifted himself from the floor and headed to the bathroom, fetching a towel.

When he returned to the room, the form of Miss Avery was gone. Her body, now a lump of cloth and batting on the floor, held no bloodstains or gaping holes where eyes should be. He skirted around the comforter and climbed into bed, laying the towel down over the place where his back had wept his fear into the cloth. His skin, clammy and cold, pressed into the material, and he stared at the clock's glowing face, muscles twitching occasionally with post-nightmare jitters.

"It was a nightmare," he told the room, as though it could hear him. His breath came in spurts; first fast, then slow. As sleep slowly crept close to him, he pressed his hands against his chest to feel his heartbeat, an uneven staccato but still present. He wasn't a monster. Monsters didn't have heartbeats so unsteady and weak. He wasn't Jared Freeman.

He wasn't Jared Freeman.

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“What do you want to talk about, Will?” Dr. Du Maurier was as perfectly put together as she had been the day before. Her curled hair still lay over one shoulder, and her perfect blouse lay against every curve the way it was designed to. It appeared that they’d lifted her from the couch in the counselor’s office and placed her on the chair in a ritzy, fancy office, nary a strand out of place. Will shifted in his own chair, the back too far away to fall into and the base too wide for him to get comfortable.

“I don’t really have anything to say,” he said, looking to Hannibal Lecter who sat beside Dr. Du Maurier, poised and indiscernible. He’d greeted Will when he came in, polite. There was no indication of his following Will, no indication of his previous interest. He occasionally jotted down a note in a sleek black notebook, but nothing else.

“If my associate’s presence is troubling you, we can ask him to step out,” Du Maurier offered kindly. Will looked back to her hands poised over a notebook of her own, ashamed to realize he’d been staring. Hopefully Hannibal hadn’t noticed.

“It’s fine,” he said, shrugging.

“I’m curious at your father making this appointment if you don’t have anything to say. Did he force you to come here?” she asked, shifting to cross her legs and adjust her stance.

“He strongly suggested it,” Will replied.

“But you don’t feel you need it,” Du Maurier noted.

“Everything to say, I said yesterday. The rest is just…” He waved his hands as though he could sweep away the aftermath of the night before as easily as he brushed dirt off of his jeans. He felt rumpled, sorely overused and pressed out to dry, like laundry.

“Therapy isn’t to delve deep into the things you’ve already said. It’s to bring light to the things left unsaid so that you can better understand them. You experienced a traumatic incident, and their concern is that you will internalize what happened rather than deal with it.”

“I don’t think I’m capable of internalizing anything,” Will retorted sharply. Instantly, he regretted it –her porcelain smile twitched.

“Do your emotions often trickle out of you with little regard to whether you want them to?” she asked.

“I just already have a way of handling my feelings that don’t involve me sitting here and telling everything to you,” he said after a moment, finding the words hidden in the sands scattering in his mind. He sighed, shifting and resting his elbows on his knees, desperately trying to scrub the remnants of the nightmares from his eyes. The moment his fingertips brushed against his eyelids though, he stopped. Miss Avery’s eyes gave way with nothing, no consequence to their existence. He folded his arms quickly and stared down at the lush, rich carpet instead.

“Did you have poor dreams last night?” Du Maurier asked. Will was keenly aware of her stare on the top of his head.

“I think we all did,” he said quietly.

“I’m not referring to everyone else, though; I want to talk about you.”

“What if I don’t want to talk about myself?” he demanded, looking up at her. He met her eyes and instantly regretted it –they were shuttered, as unreadable as her perfect posture and perfect clothing. He looked away, to Hannibal who paused in his writing to study the floor as well, deep in thought.

“We don’t have to talk at all if you prefer,” she said with a smile. “This hour is yours for whatever you’d like.”

“An hour?” Will asked, skeptical. He glanced at his watch, but it’d only been thirty minutes, the second hand crawling at a snail’s pace.

“Yes, an hour.”

“I just…I don’t have much to say to people,” he said, studying his watch. He could be quiet for an hour. He could be quiet for two hours if he was being honest. Time wasn’t something that kept an orderly manner for him. It leapt, it froze, it fumbled. Studying a tree could take three hours that he never knew he had, but homework could take five minutes when there was something at stake.

“You have trouble relating to the people around you?” Du Maurier inquired.

“Don’t you?” His voice attempted to betray him with a trembling warble that he stopped the moment it started in the base of his neck. He wouldn’t be seen as weak –rather, he couldn’t afford to.

“I think we all feel as though we have a self that we show the world, as well as a true self. You told your father that you would come here because he…*strongly* suggested it, but your true feelings are quite opposite.”

“I think that’s what they call humoring someone,” he said snidely.

“Have you always struggled to connect to your peers?” That question took him aback, and he fumbled, pressing his palms together and holding his breath.

“I think that’s why I was placed in Miss Avery’s class,” he said after a moment, gauging the tone and delivery of his words. They were hesitant, but they didn’t fall flat.

“Did you find her helpful?”

“I was able to get a job, keep decent grades, and attend school functions; I’d say so.”

“Will you be able to maintain those abilities without her?” He felt rather than saw Hannibal’s head lift slightly, keen on his answer. It was a simple enough question, but the

tone underlying it made Will nervous, made his immediate answer freeze and curl about in his mouth, rancid.

"…Yes," he said slowly, and it was a terrible lie in its delivery. Du Maurier's smile cracked, shifted to more of a smirk at how awful it sounded.

"Do you often do what your father asks, even at the cost of your own desires or wishes?" she asked, changing tactics. Will warily leaned back, back, back to the backing of the couch that was made with odd proportions. He had to slump to reach it, really slip down into the folds of the leather. He propped his head up and observed her through half-lidded eyes.

"He's my father," he said matter-of-factly.

"I see from your records that you're eighteen years old. You legally don't have to do what he *strongly* suggests you do."

"If you're concerned that he's abusive or forceful, he's not. He's just worried about me."

"And that concern brought you here, where you don't wish to be, speaking with someone that you don't wish to know." Du Maurier scratched a few words down in her notebook, gaze snapping up to his face when he reached up and scraped fingers through his unruly hair. "How does that make you feel?"

"…Like we should sit in silence for awhile," he said, pinching the bridge of his nose. He'd forgotten his glasses, lost somewhere in the house or in his car. He'd find them sooner or later, perpetually bent and perpetually prone to getting lost once more. Du Maurier didn't speak, Hannibal didn't speak, and Will stared up at the ceiling whose details were rather ostentatious for a simple counseling room.

Fifteen minutes came, each second pulsing behind his left eye, marking the moments until he could politely leave. He wasn't quite sure how he knew it'd been fifteen minutes, only that it was time to leave. He stood, and Dr. Du Maurier stood as well, her crafty smile frozen in place once more. Hannibal finished writing something down before he stood, hazel eyes assessing Will from head to toe before he looked to his professor expectantly.

"Thank you for coming to see me today, Will," she said, walking towards the door. Will followed, keenly aware of Hannibal stepping in line behind him, following too close.

"You're welcome," he said, skirting around her when she opened the door. The hallway was empty, free of witnesses to see him lurking about a psychiatrist's office. For that he was grateful, relief a balm. He'd gone to therapy, as his father asked. He didn't have to go back ever again.

"I know you only came because of your father, but I strongly recommend that you come back," Du Maurier said, and she touched his shoulder briefly. Will flinched from it, backing out of the door rather than stepping through. Du Maurier's smile grew.

“I don’t think I will,” he said.

“My office is just a phone call away. Have a relaxing day.” Behind her, Hannibal studied Will’s face, and if he didn’t know better, he’d have thought he was drinking him in, taking something from him. Will met his gaze, and beneath the flecks of gold, brown, and green, something lurked that made his throat go dry, made him stumble over his own feet as he turned and walked away without looking back.

Du Maurier closed the door without another word.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

> Wow, so many hits/kudos/comments! Thank you so much, guys! I'm really having fun writing this -forever ago I tried to go for a creepy/psychological vibe with different characters and a different setting, but it just wasn't the same. I guess that's something to be said for Hannibal, right? :) I hope you enjoy!

Chapter 3:

The week crawled, then stood, then walked to Saturday. Will didn't return to the psychiatrist's office, his father pleased when he informed him that he felt better after speaking with her. Work hours for his dad were such that he was gone by 5:30 A.M. and didn't return until at least 6:30 P.M or 7:00, leaving Will to his own devices without supervision. Will put in as many hours at the Mike's Mufflers as he could –rather, he put in as many as Steve allowed. Overtime wasn't an option, and after the third eleven hour day he was sent home with a shout at his back to get some rest.

Sleep was evasive. Better put, Will avoided sleep. Each night brought new forms of Miss Avery's death, his hands stained red as he woke with panicked sounds falling from his lips, desperately trying to wipe away the signs of his sins. When Saturday came around, he could boast an average three to four hours each night before, and he sat at a park on a bench with shadows darting under his eyes and a head that bobbed close to nodding off.

Parks and public spaces were good for him –that is, he tried very hard to convince himself of that. More often than not, he avoided spaces where too many people would crowd too close, but he reasoned that if he was surrounded, he wouldn't lose sight of himself again and become Jared Freeman. He'd remain Will Graham, a sore sight but his own person none-the-less. Within the first five minutes, a woman sat next to him and chatted on her phone, casting side-glances towards him as she talked about her apparent singledom and how awful it was to not have someone.

Will pointedly watched the children down the hill playing soccer.

Next, an old man sat next to him and tossed bread crumbs to birds. He offered the bag to Will, but Will politely shook his head and slumped back into the wooden grooves of the bench, letting them really dig in. Birds moved about at his feet, and after an hour the old man rose and toddled away, whistling.

A mother with two rowdy children hustled by, and one threw their toy down. Will watched the mother pause, look about, then realized the toy was by his feet. He contemplated reaching for it, but the moment that he moved to, the child had already darted around him,

flashing a toothless grin before running down the sidewalk. The mother ran quickly after them.

He wasn't sure how long he was supposed to sit there, people watching. Miss Avery always encouraged him to watch people and note their speech patterns, their body language, and their tone. What he would sometimes say in a normal tone would be conveyed as irritable, grouchy, but when others said it, it was kind or welcoming. Where did they find the ability? How did they twist their lips to change how the words were perceived? Better yet, why in the world was he supposed to care? It's not like Miss Avery was going to ask for a report on his weekend observations. She wasn't going to ask him for anything ever again, in fact.

"Will Graham." The voice startled him, first with his name, then with the tone of familiarity. He looked away from the kids playing a game of soccer and squinted into the sunlight, peering up at Hannibal with a sense of foreboding clamoring in his gut. He made no move to stand, but he didn't protest when Hannibal sat beside him, half an inch away from being too close for comfort. He was dressed as immaculately as he'd been at school and at the therapy session, a vest and button-up as though he were about to escort someone to a ritzy dinner.

"I haven't seen you at Dr. Du Maurier's office all week," he said lightly. Will studied his neatly pressed trousers –another set, no doubt. It was obvious that money all but trickled off of the college student, something old and something that screamed trust fund. What sort of family did he come from that dressing in such a way at all hours of the day was not only normal but somehow elegant rather than tacky?

"I was only asked to go once, so I went once," Will said, looking down to Hannibal's shoes. Whereas scuffs and marks of time made Will's shoes appear insufficient as footwear, Hannibal's looked unworn. He had an almost irresistible urge to stomp on it to leave an ugly scrape of some sort. Perhaps then, Hannibal would see just how unwelcome his presence was.

"I went to your place of work, but he said that he gave you the day off," Hannibal continued, either ignoring or refusing to take Will's bait.

"Are you following me?" he asked suspiciously.

"Not at all. After he said he gave you the day off, I decided a walk in the park was just what I needed to refresh myself. Seasons are interesting in this state; it still very much feels like summer."

"Why did you go to my job?" Will looked away from him, exhaling sharply.

"We leave on Monday to go back to Virginia, and my car is having problems. I was informed that you were the best mechanic in this town. Even your boss was keen to say you had an eye for machines." Will wasn't surprised at the praise. He often saw things that Steve couldn't see, too lost as the older man was in his sports teams, his hatred of the government, and his microbrews.

“That led you here?” he asked dubiously.

“The park is a ten minute walk from your job, Will. I hardly find the circumstances that far-fetched.” Will couldn’t argue that. He yawned, a gaping and wincing expression that he covered with a hand before he leaned forward and looked back to the kids playing their game, parents off to the side to catch up with someone within their own age group. He wondered just how mundane it was to spend most of your days with someone more than half your age and at half of your brain capacity. Children were an odd, foreign entity.

“Are you often that suspicious of people?” Hannibal asked when Will didn’t speak.

“I was just wondering if you were going to proposition me again.”

“And that curiosity led you to assume I was following you?” Hannibal sounded amused.

“I didn’t know, which is why I asked.”

“So here we are: a casual coincidence and an uncomfortable conversation for you. You must resent this Saturday now.”

“Are you going to proposition me again?” Will inquired, glancing at him. He was startled to see Hannibal not watching the soccer game like he was. He was studying Will, leg crossed elegantly, hands clasped on the knee. High cheekbones made his eyes appear squinted, as though his scrutiny was too intense for a casual meet in the park. Will frowned and looked away.

“I have another proposition, but this one I believe you’ll find far more appealing.”

“Oh?” Will scowled, his neck prickling.

“I don’t quite trust the other people at your workplace to fix my car. They informed me that you were the best, and I’m particular about having the best in all things.” Hannibal laughed, a quiet huff of breath. “Would you mind fixing my car for me? I’ll pay you, of course.”

“What’s wrong with it?” Will asked after a moment.

“It’s making an odd sound that I’ve never heard before. I’m not a mechanic, otherwise-” he lifted his hands, palms out and up, “-I’d have fixed it myself.”

“I can’t say I’ll be able to fix it without the right tools,” Will said, watching two girls stroll by. Their walks were in sync, their ponytails swaying together. As one, they glanced covertly to the two of them on the bench, then away where they whispered and conspired with one another. The moment they went to look back again, Will quickly looked down at the sidewalk. He didn’t want to see their eyes.

“I’ll still pay, even if you only take a look at it to tell me what’s wrong.” Hannibal’s tone held humor, a joke only he knew. “Do you date at all, Will?”

“What?” Will’s tone was colored in discomfort.

“I only ask because those two young ladies were observing us with intent. You made no move to say anything, even as they placed themselves directly in front of you.”

“I just…I don’t care much,” he murmured, standing up.

“Oh yes, I forgot that you don’t have a general interest in people.” Hannibal stood as well, tucking his hands into his trouser pockets. “I assume that also extends to dating.”

“I’ll take a look at your car, but I won’t promise anything,” Will said, heading the opposite direction of the two ladies. Hannibal followed, a half-step behind.

“I appreciate the kindness, Will,” he said pleasantly. “Not many people would help a stranger in a new town.”

An hour later took Will to a hotel whose wraparound drop off put his apartment complex’s shitty and cracked parking lot to shame. Tucked to the side were personal cars, and Hannibal’s had the same sort of class that Will would expect of the rich and affluent. It was non-descript black with windows tinted to just above what was legal, and the Jaguar symbol on the front appeared recently polished.

“Anything so far?” Hannibal asked. Most people left Will to his devices while he was working, preferring to wait inside rather than stand about. Not Hannibal. The moment that Will arrived, he was presented with a glass of sparkling water, some small refreshment, then showed where his workplace was. Hannibal stood by, not speaking but not shifting about impatiently, either. He was a striking figure, a twenty-something college grad with clean lines of a suit speaking of the sort of breeding that Will had never seen before. Will shifted underneath the car and frowned, puzzled.

“There is almost no oil in your car,” he called out from underneath it. “Looks like the seal on the filter wasn’t right.”

“Is that something that can be fixed?” Will inched his way slowly out from under the car, pushing down on his shirt that rode up in his work. He stood, and Hannibal offered a cloth to wipe his hands on.

“Just need new oil and a different filter. Whoever did this last time put the wrong size on it. You’re lucky you hadn’t kept driving, otherwise it’d have blown off mid-drive and then you’d have been in some trouble.”

“I’m lucky you were able to diagnose it so quickly,” Hannibal said, watching Will clean his fingertips off.

“I can grab the stuff from a part store down the road for you. It won’t take long.”

“I’ll accompany you, if you don’t mind. I should like to learn how to do this myself.” Will didn’t have a good argument for that, apart from him not wanting to. He frowned down

at the rag and his grubby fingers, considering. After a moment, he sighed quietly and nodded, heading towards his own shabby 1988 truck that'd seen better days and a better interior.

Hannibal was quiet on the ride there, quiet in the store, and quiet on the way back. Although Will chafed at the intrusion, he didn't mind the silence. It wasn't the forced, heavy silence of unspoken words; it wasn't the silence of pressure to struggle to fill the space with insipid talk that ultimately meant nothing. It was calm, reserved, and it helped steady his mind from its normal, too-fast current.

Putting oil in a car was mechanical. It was autopilot, and Will went through the motions, aware of Hannibal watching each part with interest. This was something that he could handle, something that he could endure. He kept the rag tucked into his pants' pocket to keep at the ready, and it wasn't until he was securing the correct filter that Hannibal broke the silence.

"When you dream of Miss Avery, are you watching her die from a distance, or are your hands wrapped around her neck?" It was a simple, matter-of-fact question, stated with such calmness that it took him completely off guard.

"What makes you think that I dream of her death?" he asked, gritting his teeth.

"The shadows under your eyes tell me you have trouble sleeping; there are indents in your palms from your nails breaking flesh, and there is an odd sort of bruise on the back of your neck to shoulder. I assume that's from falling out of bed?"

"And?"

"Those are not tasteful dreams that circle you while you sleep."

"My thoughts aren't generally tasty, even when I'm awake," Will ground out, head ducked. He itched to lift his collar up to hide how his own body betrayed him.

"Nor mine, to be sure. How are your fortresses?"

"Sturdier than ever."

"And new ones rise with every nightmare that climbs behind your eyes?" Will grunted and straightened, turning to glower at Hannibal who stood with the ease of someone that was used to getting what they wanted.

"Don't psychoanalyze me," he warned, jerking the rag out of his pocket to clean his hands on it. "I don't like it."

"Do you dislike it because it shows you your own fears, or do you dislike it because it shows your darker thoughts and dreams to someone else?"

"I dislike it because I already told you and Dr. Du Maurier that I wasn't interested in this. Your car's fixed." Will turned and dropped the hood, heart pounding.

“Dr. Du Maurier has spoken with other students, but as I said before, you have been the most interesting. When they speak, they think of what could have happened, what should have happened. When you speak, you see Jared Freeman’s reality as though it were your own. His thoughts have crawled into your ear to fester, and so you have spent this week in a dreamlike state where you see blood on your hands and you feel heartache as though she rejected *you*.”

“Stop,” Will stammered.

“You feel rinsed and used, pressed too harshly and left in the elements to rot. You are both intrigued by your desires for violence, for the feeling of her life fleeing by your hand, but you are also afraid. Are these your thoughts, or are they someone else’s? Jared Freeman is already dead, but in your mind sometimes, you *are* Jared Freeman.”

“What the hell do you want?” Will turned to Hannibal, furious. His heartbeat hammered behind his eyelids, and all he could see were fresh waves of red surrounding them, shifting and growing ever closer with each thump of his pulse.

“You know what I want.”

“I fixed your car,” he said angrily. “I did what you asked, despite my reservations.”

“That is because you felt the bleakness of a car ride home where something potentially dangerous could occur,” Hannibal replied. “You were me, destitute on the side of the road with little to no help once I was off of an interstate, stranded with potentially no service on my phone.”

“Shut up,” Will warned.

“There is no other reason you would come and help me when you’ve already decided to dislike me. You empathized with my potential plight, therefore you put yourself in an emotionally uncomfortable position.”

“And I’m honestly regretting it,” Will retorted. “I’m going to leave, but thanks for the stimulating conversation.”

“I want to help you, Will,” Hannibal said, following him towards his truck. “First, for aiding me when no one else would have done so good of a job, and second with your thoughts that have you wondering if it was your idea all along to kill Miss Avery, or if Jared Freeman only made you feel that way.”

“*Stop*!” Will turned and lifted his hands, whether to fend off Hannibal’s words or to strike him, he couldn’t say. Hannibal froze, and this close Will could see that although his face was calm, devoid of emotion, his pulse thundered against his neck, eager. Will’s heart struggled with the same fast pace, and he choked on his words before he could get them out.

“For your work-” Hannibal reached into his billfold and retrieved two crisp one-hundred dollar bills. “-I give you this.” He tucked them into Will’s pocket, along with the rag.

“That’s too much money for an oil change,” Will protested, but Hannibal shook his head.

“Nonsense. For your mind, I leave you this.” He extracted a card from his vest pocket, tucking it alongside the money and the rag. “As I said, I leave Monday, but my phone line is open anytime.”

“Virginia is a long way from here,” Will tripped over his words, though he forced them out. “If I was going to go to someone for help, I’d just find them here in town.”

“Ah, but I can say with utmost sincerity, Will Graham, that I am the best possible to help you with what is going on inside of your mind.” If he was lying, Will couldn’t tell. His words were delivered so smoothly, so confidently, that if it was a lie, it wasn’t a lie to Hannibal. Will opened his mouth to protest, but when he found his voice, no words could come. He swallowed convulsively and looked down, fumbling with his keys.

“Have a pleasant day, Will,” Hannibal said.

“Uhm…yeah…yeah, you too,” Will replied. Hannibal was already walking away though, heading towards his car where he collected the remains of the oil container and box for the filter, tossing them into the garbage before he saw himself inside of the hotel. Will inhaled sharply, held it, then choked a little. When he could gain control of his body, he clambered into his truck and fired it up, driving away as quickly as possible. Despite having seen Hannibal go into the hotel, he felt eyes burning into the back of his neck, marking him.

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“*I’m in love with Miss Avery,” I say, testing the words out. They sound smooth, seductive. There is a hint of danger in saying them in such a public place, but I do it anyway. During lunch, I sit on a bench and watch her walk to the teacher’s lounge with her colleagues, and I long to follow.*

“How does that feel?” Will asks, and I look at him. He’s a serious sort of boy whose brow is perpetually furrowed and his lips turn down. His glasses are almost always askew, but whenever someone reaches to fix it, his genuine surprise tells me that it’s not for aesthetic reasons that he looks so rumpled. Nervous fingers pluck when he’s anxious, and Will is almost always anxious.

“It feels like a dagger in my chest,” I whisper, “that she twists whenever she denies me.”

“How does she deny you?” he wonders, and a laugh bubbles from me. His fingers disintegrate a roll at the sound of my humor.

“I told her that I wanted to take her from here, and she laughed at me, Will. She laughed! I thought my heart would burst when I said it, but she contemplated me, sighed, then laughed.”

"She probably thought you were joking," he whispers to his pizza. "Teachers don't usually think their students love them. Most students actually hate them."

"No one could possibly hate Miss Avery," I say, and the thought of it makes my lip curl in derision. "Anyone that claimed it would be saying so only for personal gain."

"That happens a lot," Will said, and he took a bite of his pizza. He chewed slowly, squinted past his glasses, and sighed. Whatever thought struck him, it wasn't one he was going to likely share. Will didn't share much from his private life at home to his quiet life at school. Even his work was barely mentioned, as though he was constantly holding himself back before he could potentially have too much fun.

"Do you hate her?" I ask.

"I owe a lot to Miss Avery. She's…she…" His voice trails off, and I study his face. He looks youthful, boyish, and I wonder if his hesitance is because he's afraid to share, or if he wishes to covet what is mine.

"Do you <u>love</u> Miss Avery?" I demand. He blinks, shocked, and he shakes his head.

"I respect her, and I admire her hard work and dedication. I don't love her."

"Do you love anyone?" I ask. Will shakes his head, and I believe it. Will didn't <u>like</u>, let alone love. He was the buoy bouncing adrift at sea, never quite connecting to anything. I wonder if he will die a husk, or if he will find someone who will make his soul shift as mine has.

"Everything jumps and skips without my medicine," I say, and he nods. He knows my struggle with ADHD, almost as well as his own struggle to connect with any of us around him. "I look at her, and it goes silent. I can breathe, and colors don't bounce in the air anymore."

"Does she know that?"

"I'm afraid to tell her. What if she laughs at me again? What if she reduces me to a fool?" The fear alone chokes me, makes me grab my drink and throw it to the ground. Will watches the movement and doesn't try to stop me. He is the sort to see and not react, to observe but not engage. Others look about at the noise, but I don't care about them. The moment the sound strikes against my ears, I'm ashamed of myself and I bend down to pick up the water, ears hot.

"You've gotten better at controlling yourself," he observes.

"If she saw that, she'd think I'd lost some of myself again," I whisper, and the heat spreads. If she saw me, would she be ashamed? Would she comfort me? Would her arms wrap around me to reassure me that everything was going to be okay? Would she leave?

God, would she leave me?

“She is your rock,” Will realizes, and I nod eagerly. Will has always seen me better than anyone. He sees through people, and maybe that’s why he’s not moved by them.

“She’s the rock, and I’m the hammer,” I whisper, and I’m lying beside her still body, blood encircling us in its warmth and vitality. She is so beautiful and still that I weep. It’ll be over soon, darling; it’ll be over soon.

“I love you,” I whisper, and I blow my brains out.

Will woke with a sob ripping from him, the very devil sawing on his vocal cords. Cries racked his body, tears trailing down his jaw into the pillow below, soaked and stuck to his cheek. Another breath, another moan, and he was able to release his arms from around his ribs where he was attempting to hold his insides in.

“No, *no*,” he whimpered, and he turned his head to sob into his pillow. She was gone, she was gone from him, and it was all his fault. She moved him but was not moved *by* him, and she was gone to a place where he could not reach. He loved her, and his love held tight enough to bruise, to break. She was dead. *She was dead*.

Hands pressed to his face to try and soften the noise, but it continued to pull from him, leeching away any peace of mind. He didn’t want to believe it, but it was true. What was he going to do? Where was he going to go? There was no world worth living if it was a world she didn’t reside in, but it was because of him she was gone, completely *gone*.

“I love you,” he whispered to the room. He was Jared Freeman, and he killed his rock. He killed his inspiration. He killed his love.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

> Thank you so much for your comments/kudos/hits/bookmarks! It honestly makes my day whenever you guys have something to say. I'm about a chapter and a half ahead, and let me just say, writing a horror scene when you have a random bout of inspiration at 3 AM is a surefire way to freak yourself out when you're trying to sleep. I hope you enjoy!

Chapter 4:

Miss Avery's funeral was held the next Saturday. All of the students and faculty of the high school attended, as well as people from the rivaling schools. They set aside their differences as they looked down at her casket swarmed with the flowers of well-wishers, a somber stillness to their movements as they touched shoulders and held hands. There was no word to comfort grief. There was no gesture to remove pain. What little that could be done was, to better prepare everyone for the next step, for the time that came *after*. People often focused so much on how they were going to move on that they often forgot to actually do so. They paused in the preparation and never left.

Will didn't attend the service, unable to stomach being around so many people. It was standing room only, hoards of loved ones and family cramped close together, the sounds of coughing, wailing, and sniffling enough that even outside at the truck, Will heard it. It was a cacophony that rose and rose until the final organ note that jolted him from his trance, alerting him to the next step in the funeral proceedings. Unlike modern churches and graveyards, the cemetery was attached to the church, revealing her family's deep-set religious side. They were long standing members that had a plot for their family dating back generations.

Not as many attended the actual burial as they did the service. For some, Will supposed, it was the visual stimulation of watching a body being lowered into the ground, witnessing a severance from the living to the dead that made people truly afraid. He stood apart from the others, beside a classmate in a wheelchair whose grief was apparent in the occasional sounds that issued from their mouth. Kent was a low-functioning autistic student, and he often ate lunch with Will when Will couldn't stand to eat in the cafeteria. His presence was the best form of comfort, and when he caught Will's eye, his smile was so grief-stricken that Will had to close his eyes and press his palms to them to hold back tears. Kent's mother, Mrs. Johnson, wept openly.

"Miss Avery just understood my baby. She did what no one else could, just making his talents shine." She didn't speak to Will, but to his father who stood awkwardly in jeans and dress shirt.

“Yeah, what she did for Will…let’s just say his social skills are much better than before.”

“I’m right here,” Will said pleasantly, “and so is Kent.” Both adults were silenced, embarrassed.

Kent’s hand pawed, fumbled, and found Will’s hand to hold. His grip was tight, and Will’s bones creaked, but he couldn’t bring himself to let go. He squeezed back, shaking, and after a prolonged silence from all of them, Kent let go and began to cry.

Others moved forward in order to drop roses onto the casket, looking for something that Will knew he wouldn’t find through floral pieces. He stood to the back, and when Miss Avery’s mother and father were led away, supported by the preacher, he took that as his sign to leave. He touched Kent’s shoulder gently, promised to see him soon, and left the way he came with his dad. Newspaper reporters crowded the edge of the road, held back by well-wishers and policemen that refused to let them suffocate grievers with their pawing questions.

The next day was much different.

While Miss Avery’s funeral was a gentle, lulling reminder of her kindness that spread and reached, Sunday’s funeral for Jared was not. No one from other schools attended. No one wept openly and spoke of better days. It was held in a gymnasium that was converted to a church every Sunday, and the handful of people were either family or people whom Will suspected of being admirers of Jared’s work. They huddled towards the back with hungry eyes.

He did attend the service, at least to comfort Jared’s father who all but begged him to. He sat beside him, the older man reeking of Jack Daniels and confusion, and he blubbered as the preacher struggled to find ways to commemorate a murderer. The drive to the cemetery was short, as only a gaggle of cars followed behind the hearse, and the bright, cheery sun outside belied the sleek black coffin whose closed lid attested to the head that was missing inside of it.

Will watched the coffin lower into the ground, as though he had to convince himself that it was true. Jared Freeman was dead. He didn’t lurk in the corner of his eye, nor would he suddenly appear to confess his love. Beside him, his father shook like a leaf, and Will wondered if he would throw himself onto the coffin to be buried with it.

“I’m…s-so glad you came, Will,” his father said, gripping his shoulder. Will winced from it and nodded uncomfortably, staring at the mound of dirt beside the grave.

“I’m…” What was he to say? He was glad to come? In truth, he wasn’t. It was more to prove to himself that Jared was dead than anything, needing that confirmation that when he saw him, it was a mere hallucination, not the dead rising to haunt him.

“You were his only friend, you know?” Jared’s father pulled a flask from his jacket pocket and sipped it, sighing morosely. “I knew he didn’t have friends, but you were the one. He said you saw him when no one else did.”

"I…don't know about that," Will replied uncomfortably. "I didn't see enough."

"I'll just…I'll never understand. I'll never understand what…he's…he was a good boy. He was a good boy," Jared's father said, pressing the flask to his forehead, either to cool off or because he was drunk; Will couldn't say.

"I'm sorry," Will whispered, and he was Jared. The guilt ate at him, shame as he once again stood beside his father and made a fool of them both. I'm sorry wasn't enough, but that's all that Jared could give.

"You know, he…he wasn't really the same after his mother left in the divorce," Jared's father confessed, and Will was brought back to himself. He blinked once, then twice; his heart lurched.

"That was a year ago?" Will asked.

"Yeah, took everything but him…" Will looked to the departing 'grievers', and he inhaled a breath that tasted like copper.

"Was…was your ex-wife blonde with blue eyes?" Will asked, voice tinny.

"He showed you a picture? I thought he'd burned them all. Too angry at her to really keep something," he replied, and he took another pull from his flask, sighing and gritting his teeth against the bite.

"Yes," Will lied, slow and unsure. Jared had indeed burned all of the photos of his mother, that much Will had been told. He looked to the grave diggers who waited a polite distance away, then to the hand that held a flask, the owner offering it to him. "No, thank you."

"She was a beauty…he took after her, you know. Took on after her, and now he's gone…" Jared did indeed take after his mother, but he wasn't the only one. As Will helped Jared's father to a taxi, it occurred to him that there was another with blonde hair and blue eyes, and she'd just been laid to rest the day before, unable to see why Jared was so afraid of her leaving him.

"You're a good boy, Will," Jared's father said, stumbling to the taxi and falling against it. "You do an old bastard like me proud. You tell your father I said that."

"I will," Will replied, helping him in the cab.

"And you take care of yourself, you hear me? Don't…just don't…make the same mistakes as the rest of us animals."

Will had nothing to say to that. The older he got, the more he realized that he never had too much to say, whereas those left to talk often found *too* much to share. As the cab pulled away, he reached up and rubbed his burning eyes, jerking his glasses off before he knocked them off, a sob crawling up to his throat and getting stuck halfway. There was a

strange, heavy longing in his chest that he couldn't give voice to, something he couldn't define.

"Are you Will Graham?" A woman asked, pulling him from his reverie. Will looked in the direction of her voice, and as the technicolor explosion faded from his eyes, he saw a woman only a few years older than him dressed in the oddest ensemble he'd ever seen –not that he could say much in regards to his own dress. He'd been able to find a pair of dress slacks at the Good Will, but they'd seen better days long before they'd been sent there to die. Then again, he didn't know just how one could put plaid tights and a striped dress together and somehow make it work. He wasn't the fashion type.

"Yes," he said, turning towards her. She had to have been about twenty-two or so, her wild head of burgundy curls dancing in the cool breeze that came by, humidity warning rain. Wide, puppy-dog eyes studied him, and although it wasn't as impressive a stare as Hannibal's had been, it made Will uncomfortable.

"I'm Freddie Lounds. I'm a journalist, and I just wanted to ask you a few questions if you don't mind?"

"I mind," Will said. To him, journalists were just as bad as the killers or criminals they wrote about –they would step on the necks of anyone to get ahead. He turned away from her and headed towards his truck.

"I know that you were Jared's only friend, and I'm sure people are either assuming you're just as bad as he is, or that you knew what he was planning." She hurried after him, heels clacking and shifting against the gravel. "I just want you to know that I don't believe that."

"I don't want to talk to you," Will said to the ground, quickening his pace. When he reached his truck, Freddie reached out and grabbed his hand, stopping him from opening the door.

"I want you to be able to tell your story, Will," she said. Will wrenched his hand from her grip, glancing to the side where rust chewed at the side of his truck with a vengeance.

"You want to tell the story that sells the best," he bit out.

"I just want you to know that you're not alone," she replied gently. She didn't try to grab him again; instead, she moved to the side and held a card out, inviting him to take it.

"I'm not alone," Will said, not taking the card. He grabbed the door handle and wrenched it open, causing her to all but leap back to avoid getting hit by the door.

"That was his father you helped into the cab. Do you think Jared's issues began before his parents' divorce, or was it after?"

"Good bye," Will said, climbing into the truck. Freddie stood poised to leap in after him, but when their eyes met, she froze. He saw ambition, cunning, and a certain sort of wild edge that made him wary, as though she were a wild animal that'd only recently been brought

into captivity. Eyes gave too much, that he knew –they couldn't help it. It was believed that they were the gateway to the soul, the very thing that held back what made humans, human. In seeing though, sometimes one was also seen. Freddie's widened briefly, and whatever it was that she saw in Will's eyes, she didn't like, either. She shifted, fumbled for her next step, and frowned.

"Take this," she said, stepping forward to slide the card through the open window, "in case you change your mind."

Will waited until he was driving away until he threw the card back out.

-

School didn't go back to normal. The substitute wasn't prepared to handle a class of near-catatonic kids crammed into a temporary room at the back of the library, nor were they prepared with the work load that came with such a group. She put on an educational video and left them to their devices, babysitting but not instructing. The placement, the time, the tone; everything had shifted, and people cast Will furious glances when he made his way to his regular classes. In math, a girl stepped in front of him before he could sit down, her breath warbling and terrified.

"Are you going to kill someone next?" she asked. Will looked up from his books, but he couldn't meet her pointed stare that fought to pierce through him. He shifted around her, sitting down and ducking his head. No one gave a follow-up to her question, but he felt their stares acutely all through class. He'd been the only friend to Jared –if that's what they wanted to call it. Jared Freeman was gone, and they needed a scapegoat.

1:30 P.M. took him from lunch where he sat alone on his usual bench to the back of the library once more. Someone must have spoken to the substitute because instead of another educational video, she was armed with worksheets for those that could do them and a hands-on lesson for those that needed something different. Will sat at the very back, dozing over his sheet, wondering if it was the sort of thing that had to be finished, or if it was the thought that counted. His head lulled, swayed, and he vaguely fought against heavy eyelids. Sound sleep evaded him still. Now, instead of killing just Miss Avery, the Will that was Jared found himself hunting down his mother and killing her, too.

He woke; the room was pitch black. Disoriented, he sat up from his cramped sleeping position. He looked about, but the only light in the room faintly bled from the door behind him, a long rectangle of fluorescence. He yawned, the mugginess of his mind not yet allowing him to question where he was or why. Cobwebs made thinking muffled, and he rubbed his face, puzzled at the metallic smell on his hands. The air was dry, a rusty tang that sat on his tongue and told him something was wrong.

A faint banging echoed behind him, and he turned to see what the noise was, confused. Shadows danced over the window of light, and he stared, trying to make the shapes. The door rattled, then the face of the principal came into view, livid. That jolted Will slightly; he pulled himself to his feet and looked around, realizing that people didn't just randomly wake up in a different place than where they'd fallen asleep. That wasn't normal by any standard, even his own.

“Open this door!” Principal Shuster’s muffled voice carried over to him, and Will stumbled in his hurry to go to the door, unlocking it. Where was he? How had he gotten there? Why hadn’t the substitute noticed when he left? As the principal barged into the room and threw the light on, Will uneasily realized exactly where he was.

“What are you doing?” Shuster demanded, casting his gaze about the room. Will rubbed spots of lights from his eyes at the contrast of dark to light, and there was a hollow sort of drumming in his chest when he saw that Miss Avery’s classroom hadn’t changed. Although it’d been over a week, the FBI must have still been investigating for them to not have even bothered removing the bloodstains in the carpet. Desks were still overturned, cast aside as students screamed and fled, and Will could find the exact spot where he sat, unmoving.

There was one that didn’t cower, rocking back and forth to self-soothe. He stared at me with equal frankness, and I winked deliberately, grinning. He didn’t smile back.

“This entire area was taped off, Will. How did you get in here?” Principal Shuster grabbed his shoulder and Will choked on a breath, swallowing it heavily. Blood splatter dotted the supply closet, as well as a spray along the edge of the wall. How had he gotten here? Why was he here? He looked around, flinching at the large stain of red that spread and spread and spread, and he reached up to rub his face, knocking his glasses to the side.

“Uhm, I-I…I’m sorry,” he said, flustered, grabbing his glasses before they could fall. Something smeared on them, and when he shoved them back onto his face, one of the lens was discolored.

“What is on your hands?” Shuster reached forward and grabbed his hand, turning it up to the light. Underneath the fluorescents, the color was rust. Underneath the principal’s scrutiny, it was very much blood. When Will registered it, he cringed, holding his hands out and away from his body, his stomach threatening mutiny. Blood, blood; his hands were covered in blood.

“Get the resource officer,” Shuster called out to someone in the hall. His grip on Will’s wrist tightened. Heels hurriedly clacked away from them, echoing, and Will was gathered up by a no-nonsense hold and deposited in the main office, tucked into a corner while he viciously rubbed his palms into his khakis, desperately trying to clean them.

Much the same as before, everything blurred, a picture held underneath water that he could only vaguely be bothered to see. An officer came and went, followed by a few more. People questioned him, but he found that he’d all but swallowed his tongue, unable to wrap his mind around what he’d done or how he’d even done it. The room was locked –how had he gotten in? The blood was long since dry. How had he gotten it on his hands?

Somewhere, somehow, his father showed up and was led to a corner to speak quietly with the police and the principal. Will noted it but couldn’t quite grasp the notion, his gaze on his palms where the faded color was almost orange in nature, nothing close to blood. It was, though. The copper penny smell revealed what time and discoloration couldn’t.

More questions; Will didn't answer. He merely went back to rubbing the stain onto his pant legs. Someone led him to the bathroom where they helped him wash his hands, freeing him of the image of him lying in the very spot where Miss Avery breathed her last breath. Was that what happened? How was he to know? His eyes felt achy, sore, and he wondered if maybe he'd been crying over it while he slept, hands pressed to the place where her life seeped through so that he could ground himself in what was left of her.

He was led to his father's truck rather than his own, and he didn't protest. By then, school was out and there wasn't much for him in the way of classes or education anyway. When he climbed in, he saw two police officers standing by their car, watching. He leaned against the head rest, exhausted, like he'd been running a long distance with no pause.

"They don't know how you got in there, but they're going to let this go," his dad said in the cab of the truck after the silence had festered for a bit. "Mrs. Turner said you looked like you'd been crying, and that's how you got that…that on your hands."

Will nodded, although he wasn't sure what sort of comment to make to that. In the span of a moment, he'd gone from napping in his seventh period to waking up in a completely different place, unsure of everything except that the place that he was, was not the sort of place someone was supposed to be.

"One of the officers says he worked with children and trauma cases, and he says this is the sort of thing that can happen," he continued, glancing out of the corner of his eye to Will. Will nodded, gripping his messenger bag tightly.

"Do you," he sighed, cursed under his breath and stopped at a red light. "How are you doing, son?"

"I'm fine."

"Horse shit," he snapped. "That's a load of horse shit. Why'd you go there? What made you think going into a crime scene was okay?"

"I don't remember going there," Will said carefully, pointedly. He studied the door handle of the truck with interest, laying his head against the window.

"You don't…well, shit," his father said. "Then how'd you get there?"

"I think that I was sleepwalking," Will replied after a moment.

"You think…Jesus Christ. You think you just sleepwalked into the room your teacher…you…" That silenced his dad. A grieving son he could deal with. A son sleepwalking into a place where a woman was murdered apparently wasn't on the list of things Bill Graham could deal with. The rest of the way home was bleak, Will's father drumming his fingers on the steering wheel angrily, Will huddled against the door as exhaustion weighed his eyelids down.

Dinner was another set of Hungry Man boxes, followed by quite a few beers from his dad and silence from Will. When they went to throw their trays away, his father paused,

grabbed Will's glasses and furiously cleaned them before handing them back to him, grunting. Will sat in his room, palms up, and tried to remember why he'd gone there. What were his dreams? What were his thoughts? Try as he might, nothing came. He laid back in bed and covered his eyes, palms pressed so harshly that tunnels of light spiraled behind his eyelids.

The next day, his father stayed home with him, making several calls in the kitchen with a murmuring, conspiratorial voice. Will contemplated listening in, but he couldn't quite bring himself to pull his body out of bed to the hall in order to eavesdrop. After the eighth call, he decided that he was owed some form of explanation to his father's actions. He hauled himself up and into the hall where he stood, watching his father pace and toss a few papers onto the table.

"Thank you, really. Yeah, really, I…yeah. Yes. Yes. Tuesday? I can…yes. You won't regret this." He hit 'end' on the phone and turned, watching Will with a peculiar expression on his face before resignation set in. He grunted, motioned to the table, and Will sat. Bill paced in the narrow confines of the kitchenette before he sighed. It seemed that all he could do these days was sigh.

"I made some calls…that, uh, that one Dr. Du Maurier said sleepwalking is a sign of stress and lack of control in your life, so it makes sense you did that and don't remember it. She referred me to a few doctors for you, but shit, kid, I can't afford those kind of mental bills."

"I don't need to see a psychiatrist," Will said heavily.

"Horse shit," his dad retorted. "You didn't listen to me and go at all while they were here and for free, and now look at you."

"It won't happen again," Will said after a moment, rubbing his ear. Self-soothing, Miss Avery called it. He dropped his hand at the recollection.

"No, I don't think it will," his father said after a moment. "I, uh…I called the school and officially removed you from it."

"…What?" Will asked blankly, looking up.

"Last week I got a job offer up in Virginia to work at a boat yard. I told them I had to think about it, since you were wanting to finish your senior year here. But after this, I-" he sighed and raked a hand through his thinning hair. "-I just think maybe it's a good thing that I do. Dr. Du Maurier said you need a quiet, safe space, and we haven't anything like that here. She said maybe some outdoors hobbies, something where you can be in an isolated place and have room to think and move. You aren't ready to be in a place where, according to her, 'you'll be forced to relive a traumatic moment without the tools necessary to face it.'"

"You're moving us to Virginia?" Will shook his head, a humorless laugh falling from him. "Might as well tell everyone here I was in on it. No, no, better yet, tell them I'm really the one that pulled the trigger!"

“That’s not what anyone is saying,” his father said sternly.

“That’s exactly what you’re saying! I sleepwalked somewhere, and now you’re moving us out of state like I’ve committed a crime!” Will laughed again, and he threw his arms up, gesturing wildly. “People already…they already think I’m psychotic, and this’ll just …this’ll just really solidify that, won’t it?”

“All anyone is saying is that your head’s not on right.”

“So you think I’m psychotic, too?”

“Nobody’s saying you’re psychotic, but there’s something wrong and I want to make it right.”

“And moving us to Virginia will make it right?” His voice caught and trembled, a hysterical edge to it. “*One* mistake and I’m getting punished for it?”

“No one’s punishing you, for fuck’s sake!”

“Then why are we moving?” Will shot back.

“I got a better job offer, and I’m not going to pass it up on account of you wanting to finish your senior year in a school where your head’s going to be twisted up around some dead teacher!” Bill didn’t often yell, but this time he did. He stood up with the sound, like its emotion lifted and pulled him without his consent, and he towered over Will, glaring. “I sacrificed a lot of good job offers around this here country just so I could keep you here since you liked your teacher and you liked your school, but now you’ve got no teacher and I don’t have the money to help someone help you get used to being back in that school. I don’t have the money for it, I don’t have the know-how for it, and that’s fucking that!”

Will glared at the table, his eyes hot. He blinked, and his hands were orange, tinted with the final pieces of Miss Avery still above ground. He blinked again, and his hands were clenched into fists, nails digging into indents that’d become a semi-permanent residence on his palms. Somehow, Hannibal Lecter had noticed that, but his own father hadn’t.

“I’d hate to ruin your career chances as a boat engine mechanic. I hear they’re in high demand and always get paid well,” he said quietly, standing up.

“Don’t you talk to me like that,” his dad warned. Will shrugged, a twitch of a shoulder as he turned back to his room, walking to it.

“Okay.”

“You’ve got a week and we’re getting out of here,” his dad yelled after him. “Pack it all up, and I mean it.”

-

They packed everything. It was easy to do since they didn’t have much, and what they did have was meager at best. His dad fussed over a U-Haul that could attach to his truck, and

he left the mattresses and book case, figuring they'd find new ones elsewhere. On Saturday they locked the door to the crummy apartment on the crummy side of town and walked away, climbing into trucks whose engines whined in the early hour but eventually turned over. There was no one to stay goodbye to; his father in this town was just as poor at making friends and connections as Will was. He followed behind him in his own truck, and although he contemplated pulling off on a different exit and just saying goodbye entirely, he didn't. His father was all that he had.

It was a 9 hour drive to wherever they were going, and he had time to think as they went. Would he be like his father when he grew up? Would he forever drift and wander? The earliest memory that he could recall was in a pickup, moving away from something that to his father said had been the worst of the worst. In the span of ten years they'd lived in over twenty-two places, and although this last town and apartment had lasted the longest, it was clear that it was dead to Bill Graham. Will's singular screw up had ruined everything.

Would Will forever roam as well? When things became too difficult, would he also curse, drink a beer, and find the fastest mode of escape so that he could start again? New towns meant new faces, identities, histories, and new chances. Would that also be Will's curse? Would he be stuck forever becoming someone new?

He supposed that it was a matter of choice. His father chose to be remade. Will became someone else without even trying. Maybe if his father knew what it was like to climb so far into someone else's head that you couldn't see an exit anymore, he wouldn't be so keen to make identities the way other people made small talk.

It wasn't the worst drive he'd ever done, but it was somehow bleak. Now that he was old enough to drive, he was stuck fiddling with dials that couldn't quite grasp a radio station to play music. He listened to the static for awhile before he shoved the only tape he had into the tape deck, a cheesy techno mix of 'The Carpenter's'. It came with the truck after he'd bought it from an old man for $300.00, and it only lasted a song before he just turned it off and gave up.

His head bobbed with the bounces of the road; he told himself not to fall asleep. They stopped for nothing but gas and snacks, and at approximately 5:00 P.M. his father turned onto an old dirt road in the middle of the woods, taking Will farther and farther from civilization with every mile. Once again he toyed with the idea of not following, but in the end he did and pulled up alongside his father's truck in a driveway that wasn't quite a driveway, staring at what seemed to be the end of the road for him.

He wondered just how long they'd stay before his father decided that it was time to begin again.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Thanks so much for all of the hits, guys! I logged on and saw the huge increase last chapter and almost fell out of my chair :) aaah.

Anyway, here we are! I'm so excited to show y'all where this is taking off to, and thanks for reading! It honestly makes my day. Enjoy!

Chapter 5:

"It's practically a steal because of the location," his dad said, getting out of the truck and slamming the door. Will looked at the vast expanse of nothingness around them and nodded.

"It's reassuring that if we get attacked out here, no one will hear our screams," Will replied.

"Nothing out here but coyotes to bother us, and we know how to handle mutts like that." His father wouldn't be deterred from his satisfaction. Will watched him look about, proud as though he'd built the entire land beneath them with his bare hands. With a new town, a new job, and the potential for a new face, he was downright euphoric.

"What is this place?" Will asked instead of engaging him in an argument.

"Wolf Trap, Virginia," he said, heading towards the house. He inhaled, held it, and exhaled with a shout, hopping up the steps to the porch. "Just smell that fresh air, son!"

Will could indeed smell it. He stared at the modest yellow house before him, and he inhaled the taste of trees and leaves. Off to the side sat a creaky barn, and across a field there lay what seemed to be hundreds of trees that spread for miles. At a gas station, his father mentioned a national forest, and Will wondered what creatures lurked within it. At least these monsters were the sort that other people could see, too.

A door slammed inside of the house and Will gave a start, heading to his new home. He skirted a squeaky step and opened the front door, trying to hold back any reservations he had of the place. He stepped inside and inhaled the musk of old things and wood.

"It even came mostly furnished!" his dad shouted from the kitchen. Will eyed a lumpy, misshapen bed in the front room, shuffling around it to find his father going through cupboards, eyes shining.

"Where's the bedroom?" Will asked.

“There’s only one, and seeing as how I have to be at work by four in the god damn morning, I figure you’ll take the room and I’ll take the bed out here.”

“Thanks,” Will replied, turning and heading out of the kitchen. A small breakfast table sat to the side with two pathetic chairs, and he stepped over a wooden stepping stool to venture down a narrow hall. A linen closet lurked to one side, the bathroom to another; at the very end Will opened the door to a small bedroom, complete with a second lumpy mattress, a war torn bookcase, and a wobbly desk. Will eyed the mattress, tossing his jacket down before he sat down on it. Beside him, Jared Freeman eyed everything with the same expression he’d given Will before he shot Miss Avery –a wild, eager smile, as though he were about to go on a marvelous adventure.

Unpacking was easy the next day; it always was when you didn’t have much. His dad wasted no time making calls to turn on cable, get electricity in his name, and get his TV set up. Will moved about, the house groaning occasionally as it tried to figure them out as much as Will tried to figure it out. First glance made it appear decaying, but after a night of tossing and turning on the mattress, Will saw that it was far sturdier than it looked. Everything inside was made to last, to soldier on.

“Water, sewer, garbage, phone, and cable are all part of rent,” his father boasted, fiddling with the cables on the TV.

“Did someone die here to make it so cheap?” Will asked, tossing a few towels into the linen closet.

“If they did, I don’t want to know. You won’t ruin this,” his father replied warningly. Will shrugged it off and moved on to the kitchen, setting their few plates and glasses into one small cupboard, wondering if they’d even bother to fill up the rest. How long would his father’s excitement last? Long enough for him to finish school? Long enough for him to move out on his own?

“I’m not trying to ruin anything,” he said after a moment. His father grunted, disbelief coloring his face a nasty shade of red, and he continued with his work on the TV, hunkering down to get a better angle.

Colombus Day gave him the next day off before he could start school, although his father reassured him that he could take his time. Will spent the first part of the morning skirting about the property, examining fox holes and deer tracks before he found a stream back behind the house whose depths held fish. He sat down on a large rock and watched, going completely still when a small doe came into view and walked into it, dipping her head to drink. He had a horrible, sinking feeling that he’d watch her only long enough for a hunter to show up and pull the trigger, and he wondered if that’s what his expectations of life were going to be from now on –holding his breath until someone came along to destroy something that he found beautiful. He coughed at the pressure building in his chest, and the doe gave a start, bounding away. She was safe for another day.

He watched fish jumping for a bit before he headed back, showering and changing into something somewhat more presentable. He left his dad on the couch and hopped into his truck, driving into what could arguably be considered anything but a real town.

Wolf Trap had maybe 14,000 people, and none of them were keen on Will as he inquired about jobs. Everyone was either full staffed or they wanted someone with more experience, and after the tenth person kindly booted him from their workplace, he as informed that Washington was just down the road, and if he really wanted a job then that'd be the place to get it.

He'd never been the Washington DC before, but it was true that it was right down the road. The complex and wild interstate traffic spat him out towards the university, and it was there that he parked in order to find some form of library to print resumes out at. Although he was no college student, the kindly older woman allowed him to print out five copies without charging him, and she even provided a map of the area so that he could find his way about.

He walked out of the library, a hint of success whispering to him that he was going to be able to get the lay of the land rather quickly. Was it ideal for them to move? No. Was it something Will wanted? No. Was he going to be perfectly fine anyway? Absolutely not, but at least he was well on his way to getting a new job, and a job could provide enough stability to ignore the rest of his problems completely.

"Will Graham." He froze. No one should know him in DC –at least, not to his knowledge. He turned, and when he saw Hannibal on the library steps, he let out a garbled sort of laugh. Of course.

"What are you doing here?" Will asked once he could find words. He adjusted his crooked glasses and looked down to his papers.

"I was wondering something much the same, actually," Hannibal replied. He traversed the space between them, dressed in slacks and a modest cable-knit sweater, button-up shirt and tie tucked underneath with class. Will shifted and nodded, his smile more of a grimace.

"My…dad, he, uh…he got a new job," he said, glancing at Hannibal then back to his papers.

"In DC?" Hannibal's brow quirked slightly, and Will wondered if he'd been in the room when his father called Du Maurier, ratting out his son's troubled psyche for all to hear. The idea of it made his ears burn.

"No, uh…at a boat yard. I was just…applying to jobs here."

"I see." Will looked up to see Hannibal assessing him with the same steady gaze he'd had before. "How long have you been here? It was only two weeks or so since last I saw you."

"We just moved in yesterday."

"And you're already looking for jobs?" Both brows lifted ever-so-slightly in surprise. "You don't stop for a moment to let yourself relax, do you?"

“Uh…no,” Will said, glancing over Hannibal’s shoulders to the girl that waited a polite distance away. Hannibal turned his head, spied the girl, and smiled.

“Forgive me, I didn’t mean to leave you standing there. Will Graham, allow me to introduce you to a student at George Washington University, Alana Bloom. Alana, this is Will Graham.”

“Hello,” Alana said warmly, holding her hand out. Will looked to it, and after a second too long he reached out and took her hand, shaking it awkwardly. She had a firm grip, the kind that said she was used to socializing and meeting all forms of people. He let go and looked into blue eyes the color of still water, their stark frankness making him look away quickly.

“Hello,” he said.

“How do you two know one another? I haven’t seen you around campus.” Alana tilted her head quizzically. Will exchanged a glance with Hannibal, and he shifted his weight, poised to make a quick getaway.

“You must leave some mystery to me, Alana,” Hannibal said lightly, and his response was so quick and confidant that it left no room for her to press for unflattering details. “You can’t know everything.”

“Not if you won’t let me,” she replied with a laugh.

“You’re classmates?” Will asked hesitantly.

“If only I was that far along,” Alana said, sighing. At Will’s confused expression, she continued, “but I’m not. This is my senior year of undergrad, so he’s got quite a few years on me.”

“Not so many that we can’t still debate about dissociative identity disorder now and again,” Hannibal said,” or help you with the paper that you’re struggling with.

“You’re only helping with my paper in order to get out of working on your thesis!” Alana exclaimed. Dramatically, she tossed raven colored hair over her shoulder, the curls catching and dancing in the light breeze. Will watched it, mesmerized.

“Even I need a break now and again,” Hannibal objected.

“I…I should go,” Will said, gesturing down the steps. Hannibal looked back to him immediately, and Will recalled the keen way he’d stared him down the last time he’d seen him, tucking 2 one-hundred dollar bills into his pocket. The money had paid for the gas for their move, and then some.

“We were just leaving as well. Allow us to walk with you.” He moved alongside Will, too close for Will to openly step away without appearing rude. He opened his mouth to object, paused, and sighed quietly.

“Okay.”

“So you’re new here, Will? Are you right in the city?” Alana asked as they walked along the sidewalk.

“I’m in Wolf Trap,” Will said, tucking his papers under his arm.

“I’ve heard that it’s quite beautiful there. There are enough trees about that you can truly lose yourself in the quiet,” Hannibal said. They paused at a crosswalk, and Will nodded in agreement. His venturing into the forest had been somewhat short lived, since he realized quickly that he could get lost in such a dense area. He’d have to go back through and really get his feet dug into the soil.

“Are you going to school here?” Alana asked.

“There’s a high school, but it’s not close,” Will replied. Alana frowned, and Will noted her puzzled look towards Hannibal. Hannibal’s expression by way of reply was not forthcoming. Of course it’d seem odd for a grad student to have some form of association with a high school student. “Um…are…are you studying psychology?” Will asked when the silence carried too long. They walked across the crosswalk, and he turned towards the direction of his car.

“Yes, I’m going to hopefully stay here for grad school, but it’s common to move on to another school for study.” Alana had a purposeful, confidant stride to her steps. Whereas Will hesitated to find the right spot to place his foot, Alana’s placement was premeditated and sure.

“I came here for grad school, and I wasn’t disappointed. Studying under Dr. Du Maurier has been a treat,” Hannibal said, and they crossed another road to the public parking.

“Are you in your senior year, Will?” Alana asked.

“Yes.”

“Have you thought about what you want to go to school for? Psychology, maybe?” Will laughed at that, although he realized too late that it wasn’t exactly a funny question. His humor cut short, and he scratched the back of his neck, avoiding her puzzled glance.

“Maybe…I…I guess I’m just not sure yet,” he said.

“Well, there’s a lot of time to decide. Don’t let people rush you into making a decision,” Alana said, and if she noticed his unease, she made no comment on it. They reached his truck and he hesitated, shifting from one foot to the other.

“This is me,” he said.

“A pleasure to meet you, Will.” Alana held her hand out for a firm shake, which he obliged after a prolonged second. Her smile was warm, engaging, and genuine. Will wished that he could return the favor.

“And a pleasure to see you again so soon,” Hannibal said, shaking his hand. “I would think it fate or providence that brought you here, truly.”

“I don’t know about that,” Will muttered. His father wasn’t fate, nor were his decisions made out of frugality or sense.

“Regardless, I’m happy for it.” Hannibal truly seemed to be happy. As Will climbed into his truck, he noted a small, faint pressing of lines around Hannibal’s mouth, something akin to a smile he was trying to keep secret. The two walked away, a striking couple of general attractiveness that caught the eye of some as they reached another crosswalk and waited, chatting. Hannibal leaned over Alana to dip down and whisper something in her ear, and she laughed, throwing her head back. Will decided that she was a delicate sort of pretty, the kind you wanted on display. Hearing her speak, he knew she was the sort of pretty that refused to pose in order to be looked at. She was the sort to happily get her hands dirty.

Will went about town, handing out his resumes to any who still took them in paper form. After that, he bought a burger and sat at a small park, observing the occupants as part of his never ending homework. It was late afternoon and the crowds of people were in abundance, some traveling home, others to work, and some enjoying a breath between the two. Will noted the casual laughter between friends, the shrill cries of long-departed acquaintances bumping into one another, and the outrage of jokes gone too far.

Some things Will could see within himself, but others he watched and struggled to grasp like oil in water. Pockets were used to hold oneself back as a physical barrier, and he knew he was guilty of the action. Hands gestured when words fell short. Grimaces were smiles when the topic broached the uncomfortable. Someone avoided eye contact when eyes revealed too much. Someone sat quiet while their counterpart chatted away, sociable and eager. Will was those things, and those things encompassed him in his entirety. It was nice to see that reminder in someone else.

“Good job! What’s the next step, though?” The question made his blood freeze in his veins. He looked away from a lover’s quarrel to see Miss Avery walking by, phone pressed to her ear. Will choked on his spit, and he inhaled sharply, unable to truly take in what he was seeing. It wasn’t real. It couldn’t be real.

“Yes, but a long term plan not written is only a wish. We need to thoroughly plan out your actions so that we know each step to take,” she continued, her gaze not leaving the general distance ahead of her. If she saw Will, she made no comment on it. Will stumbled to his feet and followed, a fishing line reeling him towards her, pulling, jerking. She was alive – she was alive? Will opened his mouth to call out to her, but no sound came. A rock lodged in his throat, preventing all noise from escape.

“Well, be that as it may, I’m still proud. The first step is courage, and you have it.” His steps grew agitated, worried. With a burst of energy, he ran to Miss Avery and whirled her around, desperate. His angel, his angel; he’d found his angel.

“Excuse you!” Miss Avery said, shocked. He instantly let go, abashed. One didn’t just grab a person, even their teacher. Especially their teacher. Will drank her in, a dehydrated man finally arriving to his oasis. Jared hadn’t gotten to her, it seemed. She was safe, and she was far from where he could reach.

“Do I know you?” she asked, and as Will opened his mouth to say, ‘of course you know me, you’re the reason I can be around people. You’re the reason I got where I am,’ he froze, the breath easing from him in one slow, agonizing push. At the top of her breast, a small circle of red bloomed, a flower late in fall. On fast forward, its petals expanded, clawing, reaching. A look of shock appeared on her face, then pain, then agony. She fell, arms splayed, blood pooling, red petals curling and spreading out where she lay. Will gaped, then heaved, then whined. He fell to his knees beside her, but it was too late; she died.

“Whatever, creep,” a girl said, and Will blinked. He wasn’t kneeling beside Miss Avery’s still body, weeping. He was standing, facing a girl with blonde hair and blue eyes, but a girl that looked ultimately nothing like his dead teacher.

“I’m…sorry,” he gasped out, but she didn’t hear. The girl turned away and hurried off, chattering into her phone.

“Yeah, some kid just grabbed me and stared like he was going to eat me or something. I know, right? The weirdos come out, and I can’t walk outside without one of them…”

Her voice faded, and Will repressed the urge to lay down on the sidewalk where rose petals had pooled and spilled from Miss Avery’s breast. That wasn’t Miss Avery. It was just a girl in a park, accosted by someone who saw things that no one else did. He gathered what little dignity he had, climbed into his truck, and headed home, nothing but the static on a broken radio to keep him company.

When he got home, his dad didn’t say anything. He’d finished what packing there was to be done, and he sat in the kitchen, eating a dinner of KFC. He marked Will’s staggered movements with wary eyes, but he didn’t protest when Will disappeared rather than socialize with him. The TV droned on in the background, and it was enough to keep Bill Graham’s attention.

He lay in bed that night, on his side and staring into Jared Freeman’s eyes.

“You’re making me lose my mind,” he told him.

“I’m just giving you what I had left to spare,” Jared replied. “You know, whatever was left after I blew most of it out of the back of my skull.”

“I don’t want it,” Will whispered.

“Then stop being so good at picking up all of my pieces.”

“I can’t…you know that I can’t help it,” Will pleaded.

“Looks like you should see someone about that,” Jared suggested snidely.

“I don’t like people crawling around in my head, scrambling everything up.”

“You only say that because then everyone else will see just how psycho you really are. You don’t think they’ll like rooting around in there? The discoveries they’d make?”

"*I* don't even like being in my own head," Will replied, and he scraped his fingers over his eyes.

"*You* don't, but maybe someone else would find what's up there pretty dang neat." If it was meant to sound comforting, it wasn't.

"Like how Miss Avery found your mind 'pretty dang neat'?" Will asked.

"She did in the end." Jared shrugged.

"Do you really think so?" Will whispered to him. "Do you really think she loved you in the end?" Jared snarled, a savage look in his eyes as he shifted closer, close enough to kiss.

"I have enough love for the both of us," he hissed. "Which is more than can be said for you and your father. He only loves you enough to hold you at a distance, moving you about when it gets too difficult to wade through the crap going on in your mind."

"He doesn't *see* me," Will said.

"He sees your mother in you plenty, which is why you'll only be just good enough to tag along but not good enough to garner any sort of love that any other person could get."

"Please go away," Will begged.

"I can't," Jared said, unapologetic.

"Why?" Will asked, and before he could continue, Jared grabbed him by the face, eyes wild.

"Because I'm *you*," he growled, and he pressed his thumbs over Will's eyes, jamming them in. Will screamed, but it was a muffled, useless cry as Jared crawled inside of him, invading, whispering tender words of comfort the whole time.

Will woke paralyzed in fear. Breath hissed and rushed from his lips, and for the longest moment, movement escaped him. He stared up at the dark ceiling, and his thoughts flew, scattered and terrified as they tried to protect him but ultimately left him. Slowly, second by second, inch by inch, he regained control of his body. He sat up and grabbed his head, holding it together tightly, a useless whimper falling from his lips. When he gained control of his legs, he hauled himself out of bed and stumbled to the shabby, old mirror in the corner, heart begging release from his chest.

Damp, unruly brown hair, hollow cheeks, and desperate blue eyes met his panicked gaze. Will drank it in, relieved to see brown hair instead of blonde, blue eyes instead of steely grey. It was Will Graham staring back, not Jared Freeman. He was Will Graham. He was Will Graham.

Fear took him to the front room where his father slept, the clock showing 2:13 A.M. He grabbed pain killers from the medicine cabinet, the phone, then retreated to his room where he rooted through old pants for a piece of paper that hadn't been a true thought in his mind before. Fingers fumbled over foreign numbers, and he sat hunched on his bed, gritting

his teeth as the phone rang once, twice. He dry swallowed the pain killers as he waited, leaning his head on his knee to press against the aching throb on his temple. On the ninth ring, he went to hang up when the phone clicked, and the ringing stopped.

"Hello?" A voice haggard from sleep groggily greeted him.

"Is this…Mr. Hannibal Lecter?" Will asked.

"Will Graham?" Sleep fled from Hannibal's voice at the question, replaced instead with confusion. "Is everything alright?"

"You…you gave me this card so that I could call you if I need help. Does that offer still stand?" Silence on the other line, and Will gritted his teeth at how the quiet sounded so maddeningly loud.

"The offer certainly still stands. Are you alright?"

"Yes…I –that is, no. I'm not."

"Are you in a safe place?"

"I'm home right now." Will gritted his teeth, despising how vulnerable he sounded, how utterly afraid he must seem. "I'm sorry this is so late. I just…really need help."

"Don't apologize for reaching out for help. I'm not quite sure what I can do for you now, but would you like to meet tomorrow? That is," a pause as Hannibal seemed to check the time, "later today?"

"If you don't mind," Will said.

"I wouldn't have offered if I minded. Do you think you'll be able to rest tonight?"

"I'm going to try."

"That is all that one can ever do. I'll call with directions to my house later today, and we will schedule a time to meet. Does that sound like something you can do?"

"I can do that," Will replied.

"Good…get some rest, Will. If I'm to help you, you're going to need it." A yawn punctuated his words, a firm ending to a sentence if ever there was any. "I'm happy that you called."

"…Thank you for answering."

"My phone line is always open to you. Unless predisposed by something out of my control, I'll answer. Also, please…just call me Hannibal."

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for the hits/kudos/comments/bookmarks! I honestly makes my day! I may have bitten off more than I can chew, but I totally am going to try working on this one while also working on Dread and Hunger that I just posted the other day, so keep an eye out for that!

If you guys are at all interested, you can find me on Tumblr as elfnerdherder -mostly Hannibal posts as of late, but I will admit to a general weakness for elves and videogames, too. I'd love to connect!

Anyway, I hope you enjoy the chapter! Things are going to start getting good :)

Chapter 6:

Fairfax High School was a 3-A school with the proud colors of blue, grey, and white. Early the next morning, Will sat in their school office, passing back and forth the necessary documents to completely enroll. The woman at the desk was kind, ignoring the shadows under his eyes and the way that his smile wasn't quite a smile. He rubbed sleep from his eyes, a headache starting just at the side of his head that leapt over periodically to the other side.

"Well, we think you're just going to love it here," she said, handing him his class schedule, a packet for introductions, and a few papers his father needed to sign. "We're the Rebel Lions, and we've got Rebel Pride!" She gestured towards her small lion pin at that, and Will nodded appreciatively.

"I like the pin," he said.

"Sometimes the teachers give them out for good behavior or good grades, so you'll soon enough have your own!" She said it in such a way that it wasn't a question for Will to have good behavior or good grades.

"Can't wait," Will quipped. The door to the office opened, and a man walked in accompanied by a girl close to Will's age. While the man had a bald spot and an ill-fitting suit, the girl was dressed like she was prepared to hop onto the nearest motorcycle and go for a joyride. Her red leather jacket was snug, her thick, long hair flipped and fell as it may, and she walked with her chin jutted just slightly out. Confidence oozed from her, as well as a tinge of mischief.

"Will Graham?" the man asked. At Will's nod, he grinned and shook his hand. "I'm Principal Beezle, your new principal. We're so happy you can join our little school here, and

we hope you're just as excited as we are."

"I am," Will said as reassuringly as he could. He glanced to the girl whose dark, almond-shaped eyes assessed him with open curiosity, and he looked down to his shabby dockers, only mildly ashamed. They'd seen better days, but at least he'd gotten all of the blood out of the tread.

"Good, good! With me I have Beverly Katz, and she's volunteered to be your buddy today, to really show you around and give you the best Lion Pride experience possible!"

"Hey," Beverly said with a smile. It was crooked, but somehow more appealing because of it.

"Nice to meet you," Will said. She didn't try to shake his hand, and Will somehow liked her better for that, too.

"Well I've got a few things that I need to take care of, but at the end of the week I'd love to meet with you and your parents and really see how you're settling in, alright? Have a good first day, Will."

"I will," Will promised, and he followed Beverly out of the office. When the door closed, he looked down at his schedule and studied it, aware of her studying him just as intently as he studied the paper.

"So you're from Georgia?" she asked.

"Most recently, yes," Will said. She nodded, tucking her hands into her pockets and peering over his shoulder to look at his schedule. Will held his breath at the close proximity, and he didn't release it until she moved away.

"Looks like you're in time for first period, but that's always a period that you can skip, right?" She laughed a little, a relaxed sort of sound. "I mean, it's lit class."

"You don't like literature?" Will asked.

"You do?" Beverly replied.

"I suppose my imagination is enough…I don't need books," he said. Sometimes though, it was nice to have a book, especially when his imagination wasn't being too kind.

"What's your favorite subject?" Beverly asked. She led him down the hall, heading up a set of stairs towards what seemed to be lockers upon lockers.

"Are we really going to have this sort of conversation?" Will asked without thinking. Instantly, he regretted it. That wasn't the sort of thing people said when meeting someone new. Small talk led to large talk, or so he'd been told. Beverly cast him a side-eyed glance, and her mouth twisted into something akin to a smirk.

"Not much for small talk?" she asked.

“I just…I’m sorry. I’m not good with casual conversations,” said Will, and she laughed.

“Me neither, but it’s standard script from the school that I get to know you and report back. Are you going to be a troublemaker? Are you going to be a nerd? Are you going to try out for sports? Are you going to boost our AP and SAT scores?” She stopped at a locker and twisted the dial, opening it for him and passing him a sticky note. “Here’s your locker combo.”

“I’m not going to do any of those things,” Will said, taking the slip of paper from her hand.

“What are your plans?”

“They make you spy on new kids to get a feel for them?” Will asked, incredulous.

“Oh yeah,” Beverly laughed. “It’s standard here. Lion Pride can’t be jeopardized, you know?”

“I guess,” Will muttered. “You can assure them that I just plan on…I just plan on keeping my head down and finishing school, no trouble.”

“That’s boring. You’re not some kind of tech wiz that’s going to make the newest app that’ll boost our credibility?”

“I can make fishing lures,” Will offered.

“That’s…weird.” She snickered as Will closed his locker and spun the dial. “But I can’t say much. I play violin in our orchestra.”

“I’ve heard stories about band nerds,” Will said, and her laugh shifted to delight.

“You’re fun. I think I’ll keep an eye on you, just because.” She led him towards his supposed literature class, boots scuffing along the hallway. Will blinked as his headache throbbed with each step of her boots.

“Do you have a pain killer?” Will asked abruptly. Beverly smiled a little.

“My help giving you a raging headache or something?”

“I woke up with it, sorry,” he replied. She fished around in her purse and pulled out a small packet, dropping it into his hand.

“It’s Midol, but it’ll work the same,” she offered lightly. They stopped outside of the classroom, and he broke the tabs, popping them into his mouth and dry swallowing them.

“Thanks.”

“No problem. You have Mrs. Hurtz, and don’t remind her of what an awful name she got when she married.”

“I won’t,” Will promised, and when he stepped into the classroom, Beverly excused herself to go and find her own class.

“Welcome!” Mrs. Hurtz said, and she whisked Will to her desk where she signed the paper he offered her and dumped a stack of papers and books on him. He glanced about the class as she chattered away, a pleasant woman with an unfortunate name, and he avoided the stares of about twenty students, all eager to get to know him.

“Everyone, this is Will Graham! He’s from Georgia, and he’s just moved here to – what was that? Wolf Trap?” At Will’s jerky nod, she beamed. “Wolf Trap! Would you like to say a few things, Will?”

“Uh…no. Thank you.” He looked around the classroom, ears burning when a few students laughed.

“Oh, shy? That’s okay, dear. Go on and have a seat over there, and we’ll catch you up with what you missed.” He fled to his seat and put his things away, and as a student passed him a sheet with a few questions on it, they tried to catch his eye. He avoided it and instead looked at the book they were reading, a small, worn paperback.

“Have you read *Heart of Darkness*, Will?” He shook his head, and without further ado Mrs. Hurtz launched into a summary of their general study, as well as what he was to do to catch up. He nodded along appropriately, and when she finally deemed him worthy enough to fit in with the rest, he was allowed to meld into the crowd of others, unnoticed.

Beverly was waiting for him after class, and a habit was established. He was deposited to a new class with a new warning for each teacher, and after each lesson he was found and led away again. Although it was a larger school than other surrounding schools, Will saw that he was somewhat of a topic for the other students, their glances piercing and hungry for information. It’d been so long that he’d experienced it that Will had almost forgotten just how much he abhorred being the new kid, the one stuck forever introducing themselves. While Mrs. Hurtz had allowed him to withdraw an introduction, his chemistry teacher demanded he say something about what he used to do back home before he was allowed reprieve.

“We have the same lunch and the same last period,” Beverly said, pleased. She sat beside him at a lunch table, a packed lunch rather than a school one. The lunch cafeteria wasn’t the same as his old school where the commons was majestically turned into a lunch area like some misshapen, cramped beast. The entire school was upscale, fancy, with its own villa of sorts in order to eat. No matter the school though, the food was the same. He bit into the questionable pizza and grimaced.

“What is the class?”

“It’s an elective class, kind of a blow-off, but I love it. It’s criminology and psychology.”

“Oh,” Will said, and he resisted the urge to lay his head down and laugh hysterically. “That’s…they teach that in high schools?”

“I know they teach it here, and they teach different forms of it in other schools. I think where we’re so close to DC, it’s just…something they do. The FBI is right there, the government, the military, and I think it’s to gauge potential candidates that want to work there later. It’s only offered to seniors.”

“Do you want to work in something like that?” Will asked.

“My parents want me to be a violin prodigy, but I’ll just have to let them accept that I wasn’t playing strings at the age of three. I think forensic analysis sounds like a lot of fun. I love a good sleuth game.”

“So you’d want to work with the FBI?”

“Or something like it…what do you want to do?” Beverly waved to a few friends that walked by, but her dismissive nature made them realize she was predisposed; they thankfully didn’t lurk closer to see Will.

“I’m not sure yet.” The conversation made him think of Alana Bloom the day before, and he wondered if Hannibal had told her about him once he was gone. The thought made the pizza curdle in his stomach.

“Well, we’ve got time. Don’t rush it, otherwise I’d be off around the world with my parents trying to sell me on a record deal like I’m some kind of Lindsey Stirling.”

“And…are you some kind of Lindsey Stirling?” At Beverly’s laugh, he smiled a little, surprised to find himself comfortable around her, an ease he didn’t feel around many people.

“I wish. If that was true, I could just drop out of school, never graduate, and live off of my music.” She sighed, eating a sandwich with the crust cut off. “I think I’d be bored to have it that easy, though. As nice as it sounds.”

“Don’t knock an easy life,” Will said, and Beverly shrugged. The bell rang, and they were whisked away to the final class of the day, Will once again subjected to introducing himself, once again placed before the scrutiny of the class, and once again left to fumble with an introduction. This time though, there was a friendly face in the crowd, someone that had a spot waiting for him once he was done stammering, and someone that whispered through the entire class, informing him of the ins and outs of what all he’d missed.

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After school took him to the office where he turned in the signed papers signifying he’d shown up to each of his new classes. It was signed up front, and another stack of papers was given to him for his father to sign before he was dismissed, the woman’s Lion Pride apparent as she’d added a small school sweater to her ensemble.

Outside, Will spied Beverly herding a couple of people that looked very much like her towards a jeep in the parking lot. They shouted, laughed, joked and moved around her like a chaotic tide before she managed to wrangle them into the vehicle. Will headed to his truck and drove home, head filled to the brim with everything from the day.

Once home, he lurked by the phone, waiting. At approximately 4:00, it rang, and he had to force himself to wait three rings before answering.

"Hello?"

"Will, it's Hannibal. How are you?" Will wasn't quite sure why, but relief spread through his veins like medicine, easing the tension from his back. Some part of him had been skeptical, wondering if Hannibal would really call, or if his early morning wake-up had soured his desires. He hadn't realized just how worried he'd been until the anxiousness fled, replaced with something more mutable.

"I started school today," he said.

"Something to keep you busy, I see. If you are still interested in meeting with me, I can give you the address to my home. We can speak more comfortably there."

"…Yes." Will said, and he nodded emphatically even though Hannibal couldn't see it. "Yes."

The address was provided, and Will wasted no time. He drove to the city, ignoring the fact that it was almost peak rush hour, and within forty minutes he found himself pulling into a neighborhood of duplexes, each one nicer than the last. At the end of the road in a cul-de-sac sat a somber, elegant pair with rich merlot paint and Hannibal's car in one of the driveway parking spots. Will's truck shuddered to a stop at the curb, and he gripped the steering wheel of his car, exhaling a gritty breath. Was he really going to do this? Was he going to go to someone he didn't truly know and reveal everything that was happening to him?

Beside him, Jared Freeman smiled his wildly off-putting smile. Yes, he had to do this.

Flowers lined the walk, wilting towards the beginnings of fall that were soon to strip them of life completely. Will knocked on the door that, impressively enough, had an official knocker in the shape of a lion roaring. He stared back at its aggressive expression before looking away, giving a start when the lock turned and the door opened to reveal Hannibal.

"Will, come on in," he said, gesturing towards the hall. Will looked back to his truck that offered potential peace of mind, and he sighed. Potential wasn't good enough, not when his dreams didn't stay dreams. He stepped into the lion's maw and let Hannibal shut the door behind them.

"I got out of class at three-thirty, so excuse any mess," Hannibal said, leading him through an immaculate landing and past a pristine sitting room. Will noted the rich, lush decorations, the paintings done in oil on canvas, and he wondered where in the world Hannibal came from to warrant such expensive furnishing as a student. Even a student with decent loans couldn't afford the vase whose exterior held gold etching, nor could they afford what appeared to be a harpsicord in the living room. Up spiral stairs they climbed until they reached a lavish, comfortable office where Hannibal deposited him in a supple leather chair. He shifted in it, noting the warm scent of real leather. It wasn't the sort of used, abused chair one found in a thrift shop bargain; that much was certain.

“Tea? Coffee?”

“Just water, thank you,” Will said, looking around. Apart from libraries, he’d never seen such an extensive collection of books, all bound in rich fabrics and leathers. The room was warm, forest green walls giving way to Purple Heart bookcases and rich gold drapes, and it occurred to Will, not for the first time, that Hannibal’s money had to be old money. His aesthetics were reminiscent of a time when aristocrats would have lounged in such a room, basking in their wealth and finery.

“Just water,” Hannibal said, setting it down. Will accepted the elegant, fragile glass and held it, afraid that he might break it. Hannibal sat opposite him in a matching leather chair, and he crossed a leg.

“So, Will; I must admit, I was surprised when you called me.” He didn’t sound surprised, nor did he sound upset. Will watched the water slowly still in the glass, and he sighed quietly.

“I’m sorry that it was so late,” he said, taking a sip. “I’ve…been struggling with things since…Miss Avery’s murder.”

“What sort of things?” He didn’t have a notebook out like he did when Dr. Du Maurier had spoken to him. He clasped his hands over his knee, much like he had during their conversation in the park. As per his usual habit, he wore a three-piece suit, like he was about to attend some extravagant dinner function rather than hold a conversation with a ruffled, rumpled boy.

“Dreams…realities that become dreams, dreams that become realities.”

“I see.” Hannibal tilted his head, scrutinizing Will, and he had the distinct impression of being naked. “Will, as I said before, I’d like to help you. That being said, there is a certain level of trust and complete and utter honesty necessary for me to help. You may be struggling, but I can’t access the core of the matter if you’re vague.”

“Why do you want to help me?” Will asked, looking up. He stared into Hannibal’s eyes, the colors of the room turning them into a russet, ocher shade, and he let out a hiss of breath. “You said you were studying empathy and things like empathy, but why in the world would you want to help? I don’t have money. I don’t have…some social prestige or something that would-”

“I don’t need money,” Hannibal said, speaking over him gently. “I don’t need social prestige, and I don’t need whatever else you told yourself that I would need in order to help you.”

“Then why?”

“I told you that I’ve been studying empathy and the power and sway that it holds over the brain,” Hannibal said. “I told you that I visually witnessed you step into Jared Freeman’s shoes, indignant at the misunderstanding; furious at our ignorance! It occurred to me, as I’m sure that it didn’t occur to others, that this was not the words of a friend who knew of his

friend's motives and chose to remain silent. These were the words of a person that had been forcibly pulled into a mental circumstance that he could neither control nor desire."

"So you…want to study it?" Will asked.

"Yes, and in studying, better help you understand and control it."

"You…you think that I could control this?" He didn't mean to sound so breathless at the question –air slipped from his lungs without his consent, leaving him gulping another breath in. He wasn't aware of just how hard he was gripping his cup until it creaked at him, pained. He lessened his hold and took a hasty gulp to wet his dry throat.

"With time and understanding…yes." Hannibal nodded, tracking every inch of Will's movement.

"I can't pay you," said Will.

"I'm not a proper psychiatrist, so even if I desired to, I wouldn't take any money from you. It would be unethical."

"What's the catch?" Will asked.

"Are you so used to there always being a catch, Will?"

"I…no one does anything for free," Will mumbled.

"That says more about your past dealings with other people than it does about me," Hannibal replied lightly. He looked away, deep in thought. "I suppose the catch is that you will be put into uncomfortable and emotionally stressful positions at times. You will have to find a way to trust me, to open yourself completely to me. That is the only way to get the help that you need. I can already see barriers that you build, fortresses that you use to shield yourself from everything. You're going to have to allow me behind such a barricade."

"You said that sometimes in our desperation to protect ourselves, we sometimes lock the monsters in with us."

"I give you leave to think of me as a monster if you so choose, but I will point out that you called me, not the other way around. If you think of me as a monster, it will be that much harder to help you," Hannibal said with a laugh. Will's face flushed, and he looked down.

"I didn't mean it…like that. I just…" His voice trailed off. He just what? Didn't know how to communicate effectively? Didn't know how to see the space between two people and connect without losing some part of himself in the process?

"Did Miss Avery focus predominantly on eye contact with you, or did she focus on speech?" Hannibal queried when he didn't finish. Will rubbed the back of his neck and studied the lush fibers that the toe of his shoe dug into.

"Mostly speech. Eye contact when the situation called for it, but I've found situations don't exactly call for it as much as people think. That's a learned cultural trait, not a survival

trait."

"Communicating effectively though, in this day and age where we use our words rather than our hands, has evolved into a survival trait," said Hannibal. "Did you mean to say you're struggling with a monster that you think you've trapped inside your head?"

Will rubbed his bottom lip with his thumb, studying the floor. After a moment of thought, he glanced up to Hannibal's face, and he nodded curtly.

"Then I may be of assistance in helping you flush him out. Coupled with your struggles with empathy, I'm sure looking at something you can't rid yourself of, all the while empathizing with its deeds is a truly horrific experience. Your conscious mind is able to see such horrors and know them as what they are, but your unconscious mind makes associations that you fear. The idea is not to just place barriers, but to have a working understanding of just what it is you're seeing."

"And…if I do that, you can fix me?" Will asked. He flexed his fingers against the brittle glass, and he wondered just how much force it would take to shatter in his hands.

"With time, it will allow you to better know yourself and provide you with a way to keep from delving into the mind of another person that you don't wish to be in. Although I wouldn't use the word 'fix'…yes."

"I'm in," Will said. He downed his water, setting it on the glass end table beside him, and he stared into Hannibal's unflinching gaze. "I'll let you treat me."

"I appreciate you trusting me to help you, Will. Are you hungry? I have dinner in the oven, and I'm certain that I made too much."

"I can't," Will said, standing up. "I need to be home before my dad gets home."

"Oh, yes," Hannibal agreed, standing with him. He led him down the spiral stairs, past an elegant living room, hand ghosting behind his back to guide him. "You started at a new school today, and he began a new job. I hope it's to his liking."

"I'm sure it will be," said Will. It was a gamble entirely dependent on which Bill Graham that Bill Graham decided to be. Was he the crusty sailor that drank as well as he cursed? Was he the Bill that kept his head down and gained steady raises for his time and effort? Was he the Bill Graham that staged cock fights at work when the boss was gone? His time at work would decide just what sort of face he'd put on in order to pass the time. Will supposed he'd find out who Bill Graham was when he got home.

"If you're still serious about this tomorrow, I'll suggest that we meet here at four-thirty. Does that suit you?"

"I'll see you tomorrow," Will promised. Hannibal opened the front door and stepped out, the smell of rain fresh on the static charged air. He tasted the electricity and smiled a little.

“The promise of rain,” Hannibal said, inhaling deeply. “Rain beings many things, most of which surround the ideals of rejuvenation and rebirth.”

“And wet shoes,” Will said, glancing to his dockers. Hannibal seemed to find that funny; his laugh was sudden and pronounced, as though his humor was a surprise even to him.

“That as well, yes. A good evening to you, Will.”

“Good evening,” Will said as the door closed.

His father wasn’t home when Will finally fought his way through 6:00 traffic. The house was empty, and he commandeered the living room in order to eat TV dinner pizza and work on homework. Heart of Darkness couldn’t quite grab his attention, and by 8:00 there was still no sign. Will put the homework away and settled in to watch a sitcom episode, eyes half-lidded. It wasn’t until 9:00 that he heard the rumbling of his father’s truck, the beams scanning across the window before he turned to park.

He reeked of diesel oil and beer when he came in, and his short brown hair was hidden by a greasy but foreign baseball cap. He tossed it on the couch and sat beside Will, pleased with himself.

“Won that at a poker game,” he said.

“Who plays poker?”

“Some guys there. Good guys, real friendly type that invited me without even knowing my last name.” The gambler, then. Bill Graham was going to be the gambler in Wolf Trap. Will sighed and stood, grabbing his backpack. The gambler forgot bills, and the gambler lifted cash from Will’s wallet while he was sleeping. He’d have to get a lock for his jocky box in the truck, otherwise they’d get evicted for not paying rent on time.

“Good night, dad,” he said.

“So early?” His dad looked away from fumbling through the TV channels. “How was school?”

“You didn’t have me register for a class like Miss Avery’s,” Will said, far sharper than he intended. His father didn’t look abashed. He shrugged and turned back to the television, grunting.

“Since it’s a different state, they said you’d have to be tested again. Do you want to be tested, son? You said you hate that sort of thing.”

Will figured that he hated quite a few things, and he begrudgingly agreed that testing was one of them. The idea of having to speak and explain himself to person after potential person didn’t appeal to him, all of them clamoring to get into his head, and he nodded after a long moment.

“I don’t want to be tested,” he said.

“That’s what I said, too. Anything else from school?”

“No…no poker at school,” Will said, and his father laughed, missing the sarcasm entirely. He shuffled towards his room, and he closed the door to the sound of laughter from a new show that his father found. He didn’t go to bed immediately; he was too buzzed from meeting Hannibal, too on edge to consider closing his eyes. He was as threadbare and worn as an old t-shirt, but he was still good enough to put in the closet.

Hannibal would make sure of that.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 7:

Beverly was waiting for him when he got to school. She waved, then lingered outside of the office while he passed over forged documents to the school. In his haste to escape the new Bill Graham, he'd forgotten to have him sign a few things that the school required. Once he walked from the office, nodding along to the secretary's comforting cry of, "Rebel true!" Beverly grabbed his schedule from him, perusing it.

"Only two classes today," she said, giving a low whistle of appreciation. "Good job."

He didn't know if it was appropriate to tell her that the only reason it was two was because he didn't want to get tested again for autism. Some people were nonchalant about it. They shrugged it off and moved on, as though he'd never spoken. Others seemed afraid to even breathe the same air, lest he spread it to them. He considered being honest, then shrugged. A lie by omission was far better than a direct lie.

"Off campus study hall," he explained. "I have more than enough elective credits."

"Well, you've got AP government with me and Mr. Huessen. He's got a habit of forgetting half of us are even alive…like he's trying to prep us for college professors not giving a shit."

Mr. Huessen indeed ignored most of them. He huffed, sighed, and studied Will behind thick, coke-bottle glasses before he passed him a book and took to the dry erase board, back to the class as he went over notes in a long, drawling tone. Occasionally, he'd stop and look to the class to see if anyone had questions. Very few raised their hands to ask.

Will's second and final class of the day was math, and after he stumbled through another awkward, shifting introduction, he sat at his assigned seat at a grouping of four desks. While the one across from him was empty, the other two were occupied by girls whose eyes assessed his curly hair, then his stalwart face. The one beside him, a wind-chapped, blue eyed girl, smiled.

"I'm Abigail," she said, "and that's Marissa." Marissa smiled, sliding fingers through thick brunette hair before her gaze cut to a table of boys near them whose gazes were intent and smiles were lethal.

"I'm Will," he said, carefully opening his new math book. He didn't bother with the pages that had gum stuck between them.

"Is it true that your friend murdered your teacher back in Georgia?" Marissa asked, looking away from the boys and back to him.

“Marissa!” Abigail exclaimed.

“What?” Will’s neck grew hot, and he shifted, looking about at the students that were obviously trying far too hard not to listen in.

“My friend Darcie works in the office, and she overheard the principal and Ms. Maybury talk about it,” Marissa explained quickly. “I googled your name and found you on Tattlecrime.”

“What’s Tattlecrime?” Will asked hollowly.

“Marissa, that is so wrong,” Abigail admonished. “I’m sorry, everyone here loves to blab…it’s this stupid website some dumb reporter runs. She makes up a lot of stuff.”

“This wasn’t just made up, though. Your friend really blew his head off?”

“He…he wasn’t really my friend,” Will said, ducking his head. Nearby, he heard others whispering, and the heat burned up to his ears. He stared pointedly down at the book and fiddled with a dog-eared page.

“That’s like…crazy,” Marissa said. “Like, is that why you moved? Because your teacher got gutted?”

“Marissa, *not* cool,” Abigail snapped.

“She was shot in the chest,” Will said to his textbook. “Not gutted. That close, what with the caliber of bullet and the type of gun, it blew bits of her lung and spine out of her back. Then he shot himself, and with it right in his mouth, the back of his head went everywhere. If you’re going to use them for gossip-fodder, you should at least get their mode of death right.”

“I…” Marissa struggled for words at his description, and Will looked up, staring at her chin.

“And you know? A person comes from a class like that and moves here, and you think that’s what they want to talk about? Or maybe you think that I just want to do my work and not be bothered by you?”

“I’m sorry…” she said, her voice growing smaller. Marissa had the decency to look ashamed.

“So if you don’t mind, I’d like to do just that –not talk about it and do my work. Is that alright with you?” he asked the edge of her hair. He clenched his jaw, and he looked down to a work page, smoothing out the rumpled paper furiously. Seventeen seconds. He’d managed almost-eye contact with someone for seventeen seconds. Miss Avery would have been proud –perhaps Hannibal, too.

“Yeah…jeez, okay,” Marissa replied, looking down.

“Thanks, I appreciate that,” Will said, and although his words were sarcastic they were also sincere. The teacher stood up from their desk and began their lecture, and he didn’t lift his head from his book for the rest of the class. He wasn’t deaf, though –he heard the whispers like hornets, directed at his back and his neck. When the bell rang, he was the first to leave, hand involuntarily clenching and unclenching at his side.

“Will!” He ignored the sound of someone calling out to him, his gaze on the double doors of escape. He skirted around someone and walked through them, inhaling the fresh air outside. It’d rained the night before, a rebirth, Hannibal had called it. He wasn’t quite sure what he would do –go into the city to continue job hunting? He trudged towards his truck, the cash in his wallet reminding him that he needed something fast, otherwise he’d run out of gas to even get to and from school.

“Will!” He glanced over when he reached his truck and instantly regretted it. Abigail hurried after him, hair bouncing every which way, arms pumping dramatically. She stumbled to a halt when she reached him and stared, brushing a strand of hair from her mouth impatiently.

“I called after you,” she said.

“I know,” Will replied. Abigail scrutinized him, and Will looked away, studying the rust dotting along the hood of the truck rather than her. Sooner or later, he’d have to fix that.

“I’m sorry about Marissa. She doesn’t think sometimes, and…well, that’s not your fault. It was rotten what she said.”

“It happens,” Will said, shifting his weight. It happened –as though it was common to have a new kid come from a school shooting. It happened, like pressing for that information hadn’t turned his spit to rust in his mouth. It happened, like he hadn’t imagined just how satisfying it’d be if he shot her just as easily as Jared had shot Miss Avery. No, no, not like Jared had shot Miss Avery –that had been love in its purest, most selfish form. He’d have shot Marissa like an animal.

“Yeah, well…it was still wrong. I’m apologizing for her.”

“Do you often have to do that?” Will asked, peeking up at her insistent stare. “Apologize and follow behind her to sweep up what falls out of her mouth?” He smiled slightly, a crooked sort of thing, but a smile none-the-less.

“Only sometimes,” Abigail said, and she smiled hesitantly in return. “Are you leaving because of her?”

“I have an off campus study hall. Two, in fact.”

“So do I…do you…mind if I join you?”

“I’m not really that good of company,” Will said, fumbling with the truck door. “I’ll bore you.”

“I think you should let me decide that, right?” She smiled. He didn’t have a good argument for that. Will hauled himself into the truck and opened the door from the inside, firing it up only after she’d buckled up.

He drove towards the city, watching her out of the corner of his eye as he did. Abigail wasn’t a shifty, twitchy sort of person. She sat in her seat, still but observant. Her nose was narrow and somewhat long, and her eyes shifted shades like the sunlight on a shallow pond. Her teeth worried over her bottom lip though, and whatever spur of courage or impulsiveness she’d felt in asking to come was fading the farther he drove.

“I’m going into the city,” he said to reassure her. People often needed to be reassured.

“What are you going to do there?”

“I’m applying for jobs.” She nodded, and silence fell once more. He felt its quiet like an itch he couldn’t quite reach, the sort of silence that required words to sooner or later be shared. When he found parking, he turned the car off and sat there for a moment, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel.

“Have you eaten yet? I’m hungry,” Abigail said, hopping out of the truck.

“I haven’t,” Will replied, following her down the sidewalk. She strode with purpose, as though she knew precisely where she was going, and sure enough three blocks later took them to a small diner that served a confidant declaration of the best wings in Virginia. Will took it with a grain of salt and sat at one of their outside tables with her, people watching. Miss Avery’s homework would never end.

“I think you’re just a quiet sort of person, even before anything that brought you here,” Abigail declared. She swirled a fry around in her milkshake and decisively ate it.

“Yes,” Will agreed, fiddling with a drumstick. Better she realize it than he have to confess it.

“There’s nothing wrong with that. My dad’s a hunter, so a lot of our time together is spent in silence.” She glanced up and around, gaze rippling with an emotion Will couldn’t quite grasp onto. “Are you a hunter?”

“My dad taught me to fish,” Will said.

“Same thing, right?” Abigail smiled.

“One you stalk, the other you lure.” Will shrugged. “Either way, it puts food on the table.”

“Behold, I will make you fishers of men,” Abigail said with a laugh. Will smiled a little, biting into the drumstick.

“They’d better hope not. I’m really good at making lures,” he replied, swallowing the mouthful of food.

“If I ever need to lure someone, you’re saying I should come to you?” Abigail asked.

“If you like. I suppose it’d depends on what reason you have to lure one.” Abigail nodded, and there was a flash of something on her face, a spark of a memory that seemed to trouble her. Whatever it was, it was no good to her; she looked down and away, denying him the ability to see. Will looked to his own food, not wanting to pry.

After food, he went to the library once more and accessed a computer, applying online to places that wouldn’t accept paper resumes. If Abigail was bored with him, she didn’t show it. She did homework, occasionally peering over his shoulder to see where he was applying before going back to her work. She had a quiet, unimposing manner that didn’t rattle him or make him uncertain of her close proximity. It could almost be considered nice.

He took her back to the school, and they sat in the truck, the silence not as commandeering or stifling as it had been on the way to the city. There was a tacit, unspoken bridge that’d been built between them, the hunter and the fisherman. Abigail gathered everything into her backpack that rested on her lap, and she smiled over at him.

“Thanks,” she said, “I really needed that.”

“It’s no trouble,” Will assured her. “If it made you feel better for your friend, that’s fine too.”

“No, that was for me.”

“Then it’s definitely no trouble.” She laughed, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear as she surveyed the school grounds through his cracked window shield.

“You came from a rough situation, but that’s not what defines you. You’re more than what happened to you, you know?” She opened the truck door, and the look she gave him froze him in his seat. He hadn’t meant to look into her eyes, hadn’t meant to see too much. Though her expression was friendly, her eyes pulled him in, drowning him in their stark, dark reality. She closed the truck door and hurried off before he could see more, delve into the depths that she was desperately trying to tread water in. Will exhaled slowly and gripped the steering wheel, flexing his fingers around the stiff, old material.

She’d been trying to convince him as much as she was trying to convince herself.

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Hannibal’s house was just as beautiful and well-kept as the day before. Will resisted the urge to take his shoes off at the door, and only Hannibal still wearing his dress shoes prevented him from trying. He was offered another drink, then escorted to the study where he sat in the same place as before, turning the fragile glass about in his hands. Hannibal opened curtains to the far window and let the afternoon light dust across the rich wooden floorboards, fingers of gold grasping towards them eagerly.

“I’m glad that you still decided to come, Will,” Hannibal said, sitting down. He was armed with a notebook and pen, although the notebook sat closed.

“I wasn’t going to change my mind,” Will replied.

“You’d changed it before. What happened yesterday that caused you to call?” Will started to shrug, then stopped. Honesty. He had to be honest. He inhaled deeply, almost an exaggeration, then exhaled.

“I’ve been…experiencing nightmares. About Miss Avery and Jared Freeman.”

“Nightmares are your subconscious way of dealing with the traumatic experience you faced,” Hannibal said. He flipped the notebook open and jotted something down.

“If it was just nightmares, I’d…I’d be fine. But I *saw* Miss Avery the other day at the park. I *saw* Jared Freeman in my truck. I saw him lying beside me in bed before he crawled into my skin, and I…” Will let out a harsh, heavy breath and set the glass down before he could break it. “When I have these nightmares, *I’m* Jared Freeman. Out of the corner of my eye, I see him, but when I turn my head, it’s a mirror. Our palms line up along the face of it, and we’re the same.”

Hannibal nodded, listening intently. His gaze noted Will’s movements, and Will wondered what exactly Hannibal saw when he studied him. Did he see something pathetic, something to pity? Did he see him as weak, a child that couldn’t handle something as simple as his friend deciding to kill himself?

“You display traits of someone who has Hyper-Empathy Syndrome,” Hannibal said after a moment. “It is still something that is under close study, as it is a new and fairly unexplored disorder. You looked at Jared Freeman, and his thoughts became your own. You are repulsed by his behavior, therefore; when you dream of being him and when you see yourself as he was, you are afraid of yourself. Do you think people are in danger when they’re around you?”

“I’m not going to hurt anyone,” Will snapped. “I’m not Jared Freeman.”

“But you have his mind. The only thing left of him is what you’ve catalogued in your brain as what he was. That lends a sort of power to you, doesn’t it?”

“I don’t feel very powerful,” Will said quietly. “I feel powerless to stop it.”

“You’ve placed yourself in the mind of others before, yes?” At Will’s nod, Hannibal nodded. “You weren’t as afraid of them or yourself because they were not terrible people. But tell me, was Jared Freeman so terrible?”

“He shot Miss Avery and then killed himself,” Will retorted. “I’d say that’s grounds for the definition of terrible.”

“You’ve been inside of his mind, though, Will. Is it so cut and dry? Are humans so entirely black or white?”

Will opened his mouth to deny, to fight, to argue. He thought of Jared Freeman though, and he paused. Was it so terrible to love? Was it so terrible to long for someone? He

could almost see Miss Avery behind Hannibal, smiling radiantly with a love for those she taught. Was it so wrong to want that for him and him alone? Will pressed his palms to the knees of his jeans and shook his head slowly. He thought of Jared's father, too drunk to articulate that his son developed problems because he couldn't hold himself together.

"Jared Freeman was abandoned…he was scared that he was going to be abandoned again," Will said slowly. "He thought, 'if I can't alter this situation so that we both win, I will simply change the playing field so that we have an equal chance.'"

"We don't condone what he did, but where you can understand all aspects of it, perhaps when you see him in yourself, you won't be so afraid. Perhaps the parts you identify with the most aren't the portions of Jared Freeman that pulled the trigger, but the parts of him that were afraid and abandoned. As people, we can all identify with that."

"Have you been abandoned before, Hannibal?" Will glanced up at him. Hannibal smiled slightly and was the first to look away.

"Yes," he said lightly. "Humans have the capacity to love with every fiber of their being. They have the capacity to love past monstrosities and see past the veil we place between ourselves and the world. Humans also carry the ability to see past such a veil and not like what they find beneath. Everyone will have, at least once in their life, witnessed and experienced a rejection in which a person looked past their face and didn't like what they found."

"I'm sorry," Will said. Hannibal laughed lightly.

"And now you empathize with my past so much so that you can almost paint the picture in which I was rejected." He jotted down another note, and Will took that as an opportunity to take a sip of water. He'd never opened up to someone like this before –he'd never had the chance. His stomach was knotted, worried at the implications of his directness, but there was a steady thrum in his veins as Hannibal heard what was said and passed no judgement. He could do this. He could do this.

"What I want to do, Will," Hannibal said once he was finished writing, "is show you cases of serial killers that the FBI has tracked down within the past few years."

"Uh, okay," Will laughed, a short bark that faded when Hannibal didn't laugh with him. "Why?"

"It is clear that you could easily climb into the mind of a person like Jared Freeman whose person was exposed to you for extended periods of time. I want to try and gauge just how far your hyper-empathy extends. If I can see that, then I can see clearly the boundaries in which I am to work with you."

"Why does that have to involve serial killers?"

"You have seen one killer. Perhaps exposing you to something far worse will make his actions inconsequential to you. It is a mere test of sorts."

“Is this one of those things you referred to when you said I’d be pushed past my comfort levels?” Will asked.

“Yes.” Hannibal shifted in his chair and grabbed a folder from the end table beside him. “Do you still want to continue?”

“…Yes.” Will sat forward and held his hand out, accepting the worn, brown folder with trepidation. The criminal psychology class had touched base on the FBI’s work with seral killers, but they were currently studying disorders, not killers. He held his breath and opened the case, unable to truly prepare himself at the state of the mangled body in the photo. He gave a start; the folder started to fall, but he caught it and gripped it tightly, gaze stuck fast on the uniform graves dug side by side, human bodies set within. It wasn’t just the bodies that made his stomach acid roil about, though. Fungi spread on almost every inch of them, sprouts of life along flesh and bone that paid no heed to the graves they grew from.

“This…this happened?” Will asked hollowly. He took the stack of pictures and set the folder down on the arm rest, gaping.

“Yes. He used sugar to keep the bodies in a diabetic coma, as well as fertilizer and their saturated flesh to give his fungi a place to grow.”

“He wanted to grow fungi off of them?” Will looked away from the photos and stared at Hannibal, blood pounding in his ears. “That was his design?”

“It appears so. Tell me what you see?” Hannibal gestured to the photos, and Will looked back to them. There weren’t just photos of the bodies, although those gave him the longest pause. Pictures of the forest surrounding them gave a scenery of peace as their bodies were laid to rest. No, no, not rest; they were alive as they were broken down, part of a connected system they had no knowledge of. Will passed his fingertips over the glossy photo and exhaled shakily, closing his eyes.

It is waves that draw me in; an inhale, then an exhale. A heartbeat, then two, and when I blink there is a slow, pulsing light. It’s calming, a steady thrum that starts from the base of my spine until it hums in the back of my mind, sweeping everything away until there is nothing but the light. There is nothing but the light, my skin, and the bones within.

But you are not just your skin. You are not just your bones. You are part of a greater web, something growing and developing for more than thousands of years. You are the soil beneath your feet, the air pressed tight to your skin. Is it so circumstance that there is just enough oxygen in the air that we don’t burn alive? Is it coincidence that when you pass through a glade, the very plants at your feet know you are there?

I will help you. You don’t feel such connection; there is a disconnect between you and ‘them’. You who moves through concrete jungles and doesn’t stop to touch the rain, I will show you how well you are known. I will give you the connection you aren’t even aware that you need. They will feel you, veins giving way to roots that grow and rise to the sky. You will feel them, and you will become one with what is around you. I will connect you. This is my design.

Will opened his eyes sharply and dropped the photos, startled. Realizing his mistake, he slid from the chair and dropped to the ground, picking them up with trembling hands. He was aware of his skin, his bones, his veins; the air pressed against him, and he pressed back.

"I'm sorry," he murmured, gathering the photos up. He looked up at Hannibal who still sat, poised in his chair.

"It's quite alright. Mistakes happen. Tell me what you saw?" Will stuffed the photos into the file and frowned, handing it back to Hannibal, eager to be rid of it. He blinked, and flashes of decaying skin passed through his mind. Fungus grew along his arm before sinking beneath it.

"He…he searches for connection," he said shakily. "He knows the earth and the trees and the sun are all connected, but they don't know that. They don't *know* that."

"Does he punish them for not knowing?"

"No, it's not a punishment…it's to help. He fostered that connection, brought everything one step closer together." Will scrubbed his eyes to rub away the gaping mouth, the skin and bone that shone through rotting flesh. "He longs for that connection as well…the evolution that we can all feel what the earth feels."

"Do you think such a connection is possible?" Hannibal asked.

"He certainly thinks it does," Will retorted. "He did that to them, and he thinks of it as a favor."

"Yes, but I'm asking Will Graham, not this gentleman." Hannibal said lightly.

"Maybe? Some people already can look at one another and have conversations with nothing but their eyes and their facial expressions. We call them 'friend' or 'confidant'."

"Then there's you," Hannibal pointed out. "You who saw nothing but photos of a killer and could see underneath his skin." His smile was gentle, kind.

"Yeah, then…then there's me," Will agreed, looking down. The reality didn't set well with him.

"Seeing that sort of detached cruelty -how does that make you feel?"

"Relieved that a man like that is now behind bars," Will said heavily. Hannibal stood, going to his desk to put the folder away.

"And how does that make you feel in comparison to Jared Freeman?" he asked, back turned. Will swallowed with difficulty, pressing his palms together as he rested his elbows on his knees.

"Jared also sought a connection…something that transcended our skin and the sky."

“That is human nature,” Hannibal said, turning to sit down once more. “That connection is normal. It is only their methods that went astray.”

“That…makes sense,” Will said after a moment, surprised.

“Was it not supposed to?” Hannibal smiled, and after a moment Will found himself smiling back, although he looked down before he could see too far into Hannibal’s gaze.

Maybe he could do this after all.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for all of the feedback! I hope you enjoyed the chapter :) You can 'connect' with me on tumblr as elfnerderder, although the less fungi, the better.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 8:

He dreamt of Jared Freeman, but he wasn't Jared Freeman. Jared Freeman stood over the grave of Miss Avery, her body exposed to the elements. Will wasn't quite sure how he knew it was Miss Avery; every part of her was covered in fungi that curled and spread, reaching and clawing from the shallow grave she was placed in. They fought, struggled, and worked up to Jared's feet, using him as a post as they continued to grow, to consume.

"I just wanted us to be connected," he said, and Will nodded, watching the fungi work its way along his thigh, his abdomen, and his chest.

"Now you are," Will replied. Laying still in the grave, Miss Avery began to cry.

Abigail found him the next day at lunch, and she sat on one side while Beverly commandeered the other. Beverly eyed Abigail curiously, and she smiled around a mouthful of something homemade that smelled like love and care.

"You're Abigail Hobbs, right? The junior?"

"Senior if you count all of my classes," Abigail said, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. She also ate a homemade lunch from a worn, sturdy canvas bag. Will eyed his pizza and wondered if he should look into doing the same.

"Right, right. Graduating a year early, hey? That's a big achievement."

"I just want to get on to college, you know? You're Beverly?"

"The one and only Beverly, but not the one and only Katz," Beverly said, and they shared a laugh. Will felt sandwiched in between two good-natured people, content to be the quiet between their words. He'd never fit in so easily between others before, especially as a new student in a new school.

"Yeah, I think I saw you over the summer," Abigail realized, biting into what looked like a steak burger. It smelled of condensation from the thermos and spices from the meat. Will would have to look at a cookbook of sorts if he wanted to be able to make his own meals; his father wasn't really the cooking type.

"Oh, the camping trip the school set up? Yeah, I was there. My parents said I should have gone to band camp, but I'm tired of band camp."

"I think all band geeks are tired of band camp," Abigail agreed. Another laugh. "Any luck on the job hunting, Will?"

“Nothing so far, but it’s only been a few days,” Will said.

“What sort of job are you looking for? A fishing shop to sell your lures at?” Beverly teased. Will smiled and stirred a French fry in his ranch.

“I’m good with engines, so I figure a mechanic shop or a car part store.”

“A man’s man, eh?” Beverly laughed. “You make fishing lures, you work on cars… next thing you’ll tell me, you can chop your own lumber and carve chairs from it.”

“My dad makes chairs out of antlers,” Abigail said.

“I definitely can’t do that,” Will said, smiling.

“No, but he’d probably like you. What’d you say? A man’s man?” Abigail laughed and took another bite of burger, talking around it. “He went on that camping trip with us to teach people how to shoot at the gun range.”

“Yeah, he was pretty good at it,” Beverly agreed. “Have you ever shot a gun, Will?”

“A few times,” Will said.

“He’s a fisherman, not a hunter,” Abigail tacked on for him.

“You’ll have to see if you can catch any big ones up here for us. My mom makes a fish meal that’s to die for,” Beverly said, taking a spoonful of rice.

“There’s a lot of land around my house, so I’m sure I’ll be able to catch a few things,” Will said. He couldn’t wait for the weekend, for the quiet of the forest to draw him in. He needed to stop by the art center nearby and grab a map of the forest, something to chart out so he wouldn’t get lost in it. Out of all of the reasons his father had listed for moving, the one good that came of it was his desire for Will to be part of the great outdoors.

“I’ll hold you to that, lumberjack,” Beverly said.

The bell swept them towards class where Beverly once again commandeered the seat beside him, and afterwards he was swept towards the tide of students hauling for the exit. Beside a small brick wall, he spied Marissa talking with Abigail, and the moment that Abigail saw him, she broke away to say hello.

“Are you trying to make a point to your friend over there?” Will asked, noting Marissa’s uncomfortable expression as she turned away.

“Have you ever had someone try to be your friend before, Will?” Abigail asked. Her brows scrunched as she studied his face, and Will glanced down at their shoes, noting hers were just as worn as his was.

“It’s a new experience for me,” he replied honestly.

“I guess it’s just your charming personality that keeps everyone away, yeah?” she teased.

“Something like that,” he agreed, and he tucked his hands into his pockets at the chilled breeze. Although Virginia wasn’t too far from Georgia, it was mildly cooler, their September a true September as far as seasons were concerned.

“Besides, Marissa’s just embarrassed about it now. She’ll come around.”

“She doesn’t have to,” Will said.

“Do you just plan on ducking your head and getting out of here as fast as possible?” she asked lightly. “No friends, no pit-stops on the way?”

“Says the girl that’s going to graduate early so that she can run off to college,” Will replied, not unkind. “Just who are you trying to escape? I know what I’m running from.”

Will tasted the silence after on the tip of his tongue, a vinegar residue that didn’t fade as the seconds passed. He looked at Abigail, her eyes staring past him, her lips pressed tightly together. He followed her gaze and marked a car that looked like a Subaru, or something much like it. A man in faded flannels, work boots and grimy jeans waited by it, arms folded. When he saw them looking, he waved.

“…I see,” Will said quietly. Abigail gave a start, then hitched her backpack higher up on her shoulder.

“…Do you?” she asked, voice half-strangled. “Do you really?” She headed towards the car, and without a second thought Will followed, a string of sorts tugging him along, lest she get too far away. *Yes,* he wanted to say. *Yes, I’m seeing far more than I want to right now.* When they reached the man, he smiled, a thin-lipped show of affection for his daughter as he touched the top of her head lightly. His grey, watery eyes assessed her, then flicked casually to Will and cut the cord holding him. He almost stumbled with the release.

“Do I know you?” the man asked. Abigail glanced between them, surprise on her face when she realized Will had followed.

“Um, dad, this is Will Graham. He’s a new student here,” Abigail explained. Will lifted his hand up to shake, but Abigail’s dad didn’t extend the same nicety. He folded his arms once more and jutted his chin out, assertive.

“Nice to meet you, Will,” he said in a voice that implied it wasn’t nice at all. “Where’d you come from?”

“Georgia,” Will said, lowering his hand. He glanced from the dust at the man’s knees to the dirt caked into his palms and fingers, and he figured that he had to be a manual laborer, much like his father. A Bill Graham sort of man.

“And Abigail here has been showing you around?” her father asked.

“She’s been very obliging, yes.” Will fumbled, struggling for the right words to say. Small talk was too small; large talk was too big. Something skirted at the edge of his vision, beckoning. He ignored it, clearing his throat and stuffing his hands into his pockets. “She told me that you hunt.”

“Do you hunt?” her father asked.

“I fish,” Will said awkwardly. Her father grunted.

“One you wait for, the other you set out to find,” he said. “I always thought fishing was a lazy man’s game.”

“Or a patient man’s game,” Will replied.

“You think of yourself as a man, son?” Abigail’s father found that funny. He huffed a laugh and scratched the back of his head. Will tracked the movement, then lifted his eyes to her father’s cloudy, unfriendly stare. It was a flat, heavy look, like layers of steel had been pressed together. Underneath the layers of steel though, there was a whisper, a scream. “Well, if y’all stay friends, I’ll have to take you hunting one day and see.”

“Thank you,” Will said, not at all thankful. He glanced to Abigail that watched, a dreaded fascination on her face before she ducked her head and skirted around the car to get in. “It was nice meeting you, sir.”

“And you…Will Graham.” He said Will’s name the way one would say ‘trash’ or ‘garbage’. He climbed into the car and fired it up, pulling away once Will was out of the way. Will scuffed his shoe, blinked a random speck of dirt from his eye, and headed towards his truck, thinking. It was possible that Abigail’s father was like Bill Graham, shifting and changing to suit his location and his whims. It was also possible that Abigail’s father was a hunter, and she knew just where the barrel of his gun liked to point.

When he drove up to the house, he found a large, black SUV waiting for him. Will got out of the truck warily, and spying Jack Crawford didn’t ease his concern. The man stood up from the chair set out on the porch and smiled, walking down the steps to greet Will in the yard.

“This is a nice place, Will,” he said by way of greeting. He held his hand out, and Will shook it firmly, glancing to his maroon tie.

“My dad found it,” Will said. He made no move to enter the house, studying the dirt and gravel dust on the edge of Crawford’s slacks and shoes. He’d been walking around the house, assessing.

“I’ll have to tell him that it’s the perfect place, truly,” Jack said. “Is he around?”

“He’s working right now. He’s gotten home around eight or nine each night so far.”

“So far?” Jack smiled, although it wasn’t entirely friendly. It was more like the lift of a bull dog’s lip, prepared to snarl. “Is that likely to change?”

"It's only been a few days, so we'll see. Did you…did you need something from me?" Will adjusted his backpack straps and looked about the front yard. No one else moved about the place, so either Jack Crawford came alone, or his men were already hiding. The idea didn't sit well in Will's gut.

"I said we'd call if we had any questions, so we did. Of course, you'd moved by then, so imagine my surprise when the number's been disconnected. We asked around, and then I find out you've moved a few states up with a new place, new school, and a new number. I thought I'd swing by." There was a contradiction in the way that Jack spoke. While his words were casual, a light banter whose questions were answered in the same breathe, the flat, placid look on his face belied the sound. He gestured, but it was a controlled, measured move. He was watching Will as closely was Will was watching him.

"What…questions do you have?" Will asked.

"First off, I'd like to know what prompted a sudden and unplanned move."

"My dad was offered a new job here, and that kind of thing you don't wait on." Jack chuckled, but Will found nothing of it funny.

"That's a mighty fine coincidence for him to find a job right after everything that happened. Don't you think so?"

"He said he'd been looking before the shooting. If you look, sooner or later you're going to find," Will said sharply.

"You sound defensive," Jack observed. "Are you feeling defensive?"

"I guess it depends on what I'm being questioned about," Will replied. He shrugged and dipped his head to hide the ants crawling under his skin. Jack Crawford made him itch, and although he was completely innocent, he felt that he'd broken a law somehow.

"We're wrapping up our case with Jared Freeman and Miss Avery. As you said, there is a very 'cut and dry' feel to it, and nothing we've found indicates anything more than what it was."

"Then your question, Agent Crawford?"

"Honestly, it was just to see how you were doing." Jack said. Will looked up, but gazing into his impenetrable gaze, he found no lie. "We spoke with Jared's father, and he had nothing but high praises for you, as well as worry. When I couldn't get a hold of you, that's when I began to worry that maybe something had happened."

"Just…a move." Will swallowed with difficulty and forced a laugh. "My dad thought that it was best to, ah, to start fresh and give me a space to openly grieve at. When he got the job offer, it really was just…good timing."

"Well this is certainly the place for it," Jack said, looking around. "You're right by the city, but you've got enough around that you don't even need the hustle and bustle if you don't

want it."

"That was his thought," Will agreed.

"Have you gone into the city much?" Jack asked. Innocent enough, but Will couldn't get over the tense way that he held his mouth. He wasn't the sort of man that Will wanted to be caught lying to.

"I'm looking for jobs, and I'm…trying to see someone about therapy."

"That's good; not many people are open to it, but I've worked with enough psychiatrists and therapists in my time to see the good that they can do. Have you found anyone yet?"

"I'm actually seeing H-" at that, he did fumble. Hannibal wasn't a psychiatrist yet. Was it wrong to try and help someone when you hadn't graduated? Was it against the law? He shifted and hurried through his words, trying not to be too obvious in his hesitation. "Hannibal Lecter and Dr. Du Maurier."

"Oh?" Jack's eyebrows rose. "How'd you manage a thing like that? She's hard to come by, now that she teaches."

"They offered, actually," Will said. It wasn't quite a lie, but it wasn't quite a truth. Lies like that were easier to tell –the ones that straddled the line and made no attempt to be wholly one or the other.

"Well then I'd say good for you. Dr. Du Maurier has worked with the FBI directly catching criminals with her psychiatric insight, and if she has Hannibal Lecter shadowing her, it's for a good reason. That is a bright young man." The tense hold around his mouth lessened, as though Jack had found what he was looking for. He looked back across the expanse of the fields whose wheat and weeds danced in the wind, and he nodded. "I'm glad that you're going to be alright, Will. What your class went through…well, I just want everything to go back to an established normalcy for you."

"Me too," Will agreed.

Jack left, and no FBI agent slithered out from under the house with a sniper rifle. It'd just been a casual business call. Will hurried into the house, and with the delay he didn't have time for homework before going to Hannibal's. He tossed his backpack onto his bed, grabbed a heavier jacket for when it rained, and waited until the SUV had disappeared completely before he got back into his truck and headed towards the city.

The house smelled of savory spices when he walked in. The air held a hint of excitement, the hum of something to come. Will lingered in the hallway as Hannibal hurried off towards presumably the kitchen, an apron wrapped around his waist.

"Just one moment, Will," he called out, and Will nodded, wandering after him so that he could better study the artwork on the walls. Rather than plain paintings of fruit or a chair, the paintings held people, beautiful Greek pieces of gods, goddesses, and passion. He

lingered on one of Zeus finding a maiden in the forest, and he grimaced. Zeus had a general habit of raping those he stumbled upon –rather, in Zeus' mind, devouring the beauty before him.

The sound of a pan clamoring off to the side grabbed his attention, and he followed the noise into an austere kitchen, an island to cook on and wraparound counter space holding bottles of wine and packages of fruits, vegetables, and spices. Everything was immaculate, nary an herb out of place as it spilled from the bag, as though he'd somehow planned for such an artful mess to occur. The electronics were matte chrome, the counters were a cold, dark granite, and the window above the sink held deep plum curtains over it. At the island, Hannibal worked over a pan, the sizzling heat curling up towards his face.

"Cooking?" Will walked towards the island and peered down at the food. The smell he'd only faintly caught in the hallway was stronger, herbs laid over richly seared meat.

"I'm having a small dinner party tonight with some of my associates, and this portion is served cold." Hannibal glanced up with a small smile and flipped the meat over.

"Cold meat?" Will asked.

"It's a delicacy, truthfully. The cold meat is served on top of fresh greens with a warm sauce drizzle, paired with white wine." He moved the pan off of the heat and fetched a plate, placing the meat on the pristine china delicately.

"You cook, you study psychiatry, and you –do you play that harpsicord in the other room?" Will shifted and looked around at the other foods crowding the kitchen.

"I do," Hannibal said. At Will's laugh, he asked, "What's so funny about that?"

"I don't even think we have half of these vegetables in our fridge," Will said. Truthfully, they didn't have any of the foods in their fridge that Hannibal had, but he wasn't going to reveal that sort of embarrassment. Hungry Man frozen dinners were just about the only thing, followed by a jar of mayonnaise and maybe some pasta in a box.

"You'll have to allow me to cook for you, then. Cooking releases a certain form of passion and emotion, as well as art. I find it just as therapeutic as talking." He covered the plate and set it in the fridge. Even though he was in the middle of what could be considered work, he was still dressed in slacks and a button-up, although he'd rolled the sleeves up to avoid splash damage.

"You need therapy?" Will asked.

"I think everyone can benefit from seeing a therapist. I have the added benefit of being able to use my professor, Dr. Du Maurier, as my sounding board as well as my teacher."

"Jack Crawford of the FBI came to see me," he said. "I told him that she was helping me, as well as you." Hannibal nodded at that information, taking the pan to the sink in order to wash it.

“Agent Crawford has worked with her many times in the field, so he should be pleased to hear that. I will have to inform her of your lie.” He said ‘lie’ casually, as though he’d said ‘hair’ or ‘shoe’.

“Do you think she’ll be upset?”

“Oh, no,” Hannibal said pleasantly, “she won’t. But when you tell a lie, Will, you have to ensure that the person hearing it can’t find out. The art of lying is subtlety, memory, and fact checking. If I ask her for her discretion regarding you, she will respect that.”

“I just didn’t want to get you in trouble for seeing me like this,” Will said. Hannibal dried the pan off and put it away, turning to survey Will with a smile.

“I appreciate that, Will. Now, you’ve been patient with me, and I’m thankful. Shall we?” He discarded the apron on a counter when Will nodded.

He took Will to the office, and Will took his place, accepting a glass of water. Hannibal sat across from him, notebook in hand.

“How were your dreams?” he asked.

“Better,” Will said, then paused and looked down. “I mean, I still saw them, but I wasn’t Jared Freeman. I stood beside him.”

“You did not have the sensation of becoming him, though?”

“Not this time. This time, he was…he was like the man you had me study yesterday. He had Miss Avery in the shallow grave, and he struggled to connect himself to her.”

“You find a correlation between the two?”

“Don’t you?” Will looked up at his impassive expression, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees. “Like you said, all we as people want to do is connect. There’s…a girl at school that’s decided to befriend me.”

“Do you think she wants to connect with you?” Hannibal asked.

“I think so…apparently a reporter did an article about Jared, and it included me. When everyone found out that I was *that* Will Graham, she sought me out and apologized for it. She said, ‘you’re more than what happened to you.’”

“What did you think when she said that?”

“I don’t know…are we? We are the sum of our parts, our physical selves included. What we experience shapes us and defines what we will become. Something horrible happens, and we choose to let it shape us one way, or we fight it –either way, it’s shaped us into something different. Nothing can remain the same.”

“It doesn’t always have to be something horrible that happens to change us, though. It can be something wonderful, or something completely natural as time passes. Do you think

she meant to comfort you?"

"That's what was odd to me. When she said it, it felt like she was trying to convince herself as much as she was me." Hannibal shifted slightly, and Will saw a flicker of interest on his face before it was gone. He scratched a note on the paper.

"Did you step into her place, Will?"

"Yes…and no. She has a secret, and it involves her father. What it is, though, I…" Will shrugged and pressed his palms together, thinking of the odd, veiled look in Abigail's father's eyes. "I don't know. She both loves him and fears him."

"That is natural in some father-daughter dynamics. There is a power imbalance when they're young."

"No, no, this wasn't just power imbalance…she wants to get away from him. Either he's done something that's made her genuinely afraid, or he's going to do something. She's supposed to be a junior, but she's taking senior classes to graduate at the same time as I am." Hannibal nodded, and he shifted in his seat, pensive. The slight movements betrayed him, made Will know that his thoughtful silence masked the wheels turning in his mind.

"What do you want to do?" Hannibal asked.

"I…want to help her," Will said. "She went out of her way to try and make me feel not so alone in a new place. I'd like to extend the same courtesy."

"Do you have a habit of helping lost causes or people in need?" Will smiled wryly.

"I don't think anyone's a lost cause…not really."

"What did you think about Jared Freeman? Was he a lost cause?" Hannibal asked.

"I think that he was lost, but not a lost cause," Will said. "Maybe if I'd seen him faster, I could have helped him."

"So you want to help your lady friend from a potentially dangerous circumstance the way that you feel you didn't help Jared." Hannibal made another note on the page. "You think her father holds the key to that?"

"I *know* her father is part of it," Will replied pointedly.

"Then what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to be her friend," Will said, "and I'm going to find out what secrets her father's making her keep."

Hannibal didn't seem to condemn or condone it. He made another note, and he glanced back up at Will. "I'm curious to see what will happen. You'll keep me updated?"

"I think that's what we do here," Will agreed with a nod.

When someone called to confirm the time for Hannibal's apparent dinner party, they ended the session. Hannibal invited Will to linger, and he stood at the island, watching him create art before his eyes. It wasn't so much the food (although that also looked good) but the way that he prepared everything, lining the plate just-so with the meat and folding the bits of green over one another in order to create the appearance of a succulent rather than a salad.

"Do you eat like this often?" Will asked. Hannibal handed him a wine bottle, and he held it as an opener was fetched.

"Whenever one is able, they should indulge in an experience of a lifetime when they sit down to eat. I am quite careful about what I put into my body; every piece is given serious consideration." He took the bottle from Will with a small nod of thanks, and he lifted it towards the light. "Take this wine, for instance. Littorai Thieriot Vineyard makes a delightful Chardonnay that is difficult to come by." He opened the bottle with ease, the cork making a small *pop!* as it was released. A wine glass that seemed, if possible, thinner than the water glass Will drank from was produced, and the rich color slid along the glass and pooled at the bottom.

"I've never had wine," said Will, shrugging. Hannibal gave him a reproachful glance as he set the bottle down.

"When paired correctly, it only further serves to stimulate the palette and add to the delicate flavors of the dish. I admit to indulging in a glass with dinner each night, paired with care." Hannibal lifted the glass and brought it to his nose, inhaling deeply. His eyes fluttered closed, and he swirled the wine in the glass slowly, lazily. His eyes opened, and against the color of the wine, they appeared almost tawny. Will blinked rapidly and glanced to the side, studying the food dishes instead.

"Well, it does look good," he allowed, laughing a little. "I need a cookbook to start making things like this." *And money. And time,* he added silently.

"Although you refused before, I welcome you to this dinner. It's only some of my colleagues from the university. You've shared a table with worse, I'm sure." Hannibal's lip quirked, and Will shrugged, scratching the back of his neck.

"Jared Freeman shouldn't have to count as someone I've shared my table with," he said lamely.

"Ah, then if the comparison is whether or not someone at the table has committed a murder, then I can't give as glowing a reference as I hoped," Hannibal replied. At Will's laugh, he smiled. "But they are entertaining, to say the least."

"I appreciate the offer, but…really, I'd be an uncomfortable dinner guest. I'd…well, I'm not very good at social graces or social cues." He shrugged, and Hannibal nodded, pausing in his appraisal of his wine to give Will his full attention.

"I think you sell yourself short," he said.

“You’ve seen my interactions,” Will replied. “That’s not…well, that’s me when I’m trying. I’m not so good at socializing at a table so close to people. You say too much, you don’t say enough, you notice the burst blood vessel in their eye, and someone wore too much perfume –I’ve been told informing them of that isn’t polite.”

“I have a sensitive enough nose that I’d be the first to comment, rest assured,” Hannibal promised. Will tucked his hands into his pockets and ducked his head, eyes resting on the corner of the island.

“Thanks; I mean that, really. I’m just…not that good of company,” said Will, and Hannibal dipped his head in acceptance.

“Another time, then. I do try to make it a habit to have friends over for dinner whenever possible.”

Will saw himself out when he heard the first knock on the door, waving distractedly to Hannibal as he avoided having to be introduced to the strangers that crowded the walk. He fired up his truck and drove away, although he did dip his head to sniff at his collar, pleased to smell the mouth-watering food that Hannibal had created right before his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

I'm thinking of a beta! If anyone is interested, get a hold of me on tumblr as elfnerdherder, or here is fine too :) Thank you so much for your comments and your feedback, it's what keeps me going!

Chapter 9

Chapter 9:

Abigail wasn't at school the next day, but Marissa assured him without looking up from her textbook that she and her father often took the train about to go and see potential universities. When Will went to thank her, her head ducked farther, although she peeked up at him when he sighed and looked away. It seemed that *that* bridge would take farther to cross, and that was perfectly fine with him.

He used the library during study hall to apply to a few more jobs, tabs opened to as many as the school would allow. Some job links were blocked by the school codes, but he didn't let that stop him. There were plenty that he could apply to, and it was only when he heard the hushed, secretive sounds of whispering that he even looked up from his work. He caught the eye of two poorly hidden students watching him, and he grimaced.

"I'm pretty sure that's him."

"Why don't you go and ask him?"

"Dumb ass, you don't just go up and ask if it's true his friend murdered someone!"

"Ten bucks if you go and ask-"

"*You* go and ask!"

What had they called the newspaper? Tattle Crime? It wasn't blocked by the school, and he clicked the link to the page, surprised when the photo of a murdered girl popped into view. He choked on his tongue and looked around, checking to make sure that someone wouldn't pop up behind him to scold him. He scrolled past the photo and read the article, something about a girl disappearing the week before, then found back in her bed within a few days, dead. Antler velvet had been placed in wounds that looked like she'd been mounted somewhere. The words were colorful, the imagery grim, and he gave a start when he saw the name at the bottom. Freddie Lounds. The girl that chased him towards his truck at the funeral flashed into view, and he scowled. That's who'd written about him?

The next page held another article, though this one centered on a man that dressed as a clown to stalk people at night. After that, there was an interview with a man that claimed dissociative identity disorder who'd murdered ten families, then Will was startled when he stumbled upon a photo of himself at a rather familiar graveside.

"What…?" he murmured, mouse hovering over the photo. He stood beside Jared Freeman's father, and if he didn't know better, he'd have sworn that he looked to be grieving. Did he truly look so haggard? Did his eyes really give the impression of a whipped dog? Will scratched the sparse stubble on his cheek, the sad attempts of an eighteen-year-old's scruff, and he grunted. The suit didn't look as dingy in the picture as it did in real life, and he was grateful.

"I attempted to reach out to Jared Freeman's close friend, Will Graham, but he wasn't inclined to speak on the matter. He fended me off, tears in his eyes, and he begged that I just let the situation go.

"Can't you just let him rest in peace?" Will Graham asked.

"We deserve to know the truth of the matter," I said to him. "And we want to know if you knew anything about his attack on your teacher before he ever attacked her."

He refused to answer, and we're left to wonder if there was any way that this could have been prevented. Was Will Graham aware of his friend's motives before the shooting? Did no one notice the signs that led a seventeen-year-old boy to commit a heinous act of murder-homicide before the eyes of special needs students? The FBI agents that were at the scene of the crime refused to comment as well, but as we know they're inclined to pretend that all is well when it's, in fact, not. I intend to get to the bottom of this, readers, and see what can be done to prevent further horrific acts against good, innocent people."

Will read the portion mentioning him once, then twice. He stared at the part where it claimed that he'd had tears in his eyes, and he savagely exited from the browser, logging off of the computer, pulse pounding. He'd had a gut instinct to not talk to Freddie Lounds, and he'd been right. The gall –the absolute nerve! Without acknowledging the librarian who called out to him, he stormed from the school and hopped into his truck, driving home while he drummed his fingers along the steering wheel, trying to expel the fury that churned inside. Rain spat along his windowshield, and he jammed a napkin into the leak at the very bottom that sometimes let in water.

His father wasn't home –it was early, even by Will's standards. He took the map he'd gotten from the Wolf Trap Art Center and took to the forest, needing to get rid of the energy building, his lungs hot and his muscles begging release. Will tore through the forest, leaping over fallen trees and slipping under low-hanging branches, delving farther and farther into the mess until he lost track of time, until time ceased to be anything more than an idea, and a faint one at that.

He wasn't sure when it felt right to stop –at some point, his body had had enough. Will leaned over, hands on his knees as he focused on inhaling deeply, holding, and exhaling, his face hot and his hair matted to his forehead. It felt nice, though. When he got his breath back, he stretched and looked around, the faint sound of rain above a gentle reminder of the elements outside of the canopy of hardwoods surrounding him. Within the woods, everything was muffled, a soft place to fall if one had the misfortune of stumbling.

He found a stump and sat down on it, stretching his legs out and rubbing his calves that twitched occasionally from the exercise. By his guess, he was a few miles into the forest, out of touch of anything that could reach its greedy, grasping fingers to hurt him. Freddie Lounds didn't exist in the forest. Jared Freeman didn't exist in the forest. Miss Avery didn't exist in the forest. Jack Crawford didn't exist in the forest. He wiped sweat from his forehead and leaned against the trunk of the tree behind him, smiling savagely. Release felt nice. It was the closest to peace he'd felt since Jared Freeman had first walked into their classroom and revealed the gun he'd tucked into his jacket.

Vines, moss, and dead leaves spread like a thick, welcoming blanket over the forest floor, and Will slid his shoe over it, wondering when blisters would begin to rub. Dockers weren't the sort of shoes to run in, but they were all that he had. Maybe when he got a job he'd get proper hiking boots? Sometimes you could find those things at Good Will or Ross, if such a place existed in or around Wolf Trap. He nudged a stick, then kicked it, watching it turn end over end before it paused to lay still beside a hand.

A hand.

Will froze; his breath hitched, and he stared, sitting rod-straight on the stump as his eyes grabbed and held onto every detail, every curve. A series of tubes connected and led up towards the trees, but the hand appeared to have sprouted from the ground, at home among the foliage and small plants.

"That's not real," he said, and he blinked pointedly, trying to dispel the image. He'd just looked at dead bodies, and Hannibal had shown him photos of dead bodies in the forest; it was the only reason he was seeing what he saw. It was no more real, no more tangible than Miss Avery in the park or Jared Freeman in his truck. He blinked again, but still it sat, fingers curled lazily, as though it couldn't be bothered to make a fist to fight, to escape. Scattered along the ground around it, mushrooms sprouted into the shape of a lopsided rectangle, reaching. Grasping. Searching.

That time, his running was out of fear.

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His father got home while Will sat on the edge of an ambulance, a blanket for shock wrapped tightly around him. Although Will tried to explain that it was unnecessary to have one, the paramedic asked Will to humor him, so he did. A light drizzle fell, a steady and wet sludge that added to the bleak atmosphere that clouded his thoughts and left everything smudged. His father pushed through the crowd of police, and he stopped before Will, smelling of beer, cigarettes, and wet dog.

"What the hell happened?" he demanded.

"It's fine, dad, I-"

"What did you do?" he snapped.

"I didn't do anything, I just-"

"We just get to this town and I get home to find you surrounded by cops and an ambulance? I can't leave you alone for five minutes without some shit hitting the fan?"

"Sir, everything's alright, and your son is unharmed. Do you want to take a walk with me?" An officer stepped over and glanced from Will to Bill, his question not exactly a question. Bill Graham jabbed a finger at Will, as if to say, 'we're not done,' before he followed the officer, adjusting the ball cap he'd won in a poker game.

“Will?” Will looked away from his father that paced before an officer, and dread filled his gut at the sight of Jack Crawford working his way through the crowd. The sun was just beginning to set over the trees in the distance, and a mantle of devilish orange and red sat on the agent’s shoulders.

“Good evening, Agent Crawford,” Will said.

“Why do I have a call from the police saying you found human remains in the woods back there?” he asked.

“Because I found human remains in the woods back there,” Will said. His tongue tasted the dirt the hand had casually lounged in, and he gagged.

“Why were you the one to find it?” he asked.

“Because I went on a hike and that’s where it was,” Will said. He looked down to his shoes caked in mud, and he kicked a large chunk off on the bottom of the ambulance. When the paramedic turned the corner, he tossed the blanket off, stretching his aching muscles as he stood up.

“You went on a five mile hike and found a hand?” Jack asked skeptically.

“I didn’t know that I was five miles in,” Will said. Jack eyed him, and he sighed, stuffing his hands into his pockets, as if to prevent him from strangling Will.

“What did you see?” he asked. Will nodded, a small weight lifting from him. He could do answers and questions, a mechanical repetition. Something like that was easy to manage.

“I saw a hand sticking up from the ground, and I saw a series of tubes attached to it,” he said. “Growing over the place where I think the rest of the body is, fungi was everywhere.” He studied Jack’s face as he spoke, watching as the grave, angular expression shifted to recognition. Ah, so he knew of the study Hannibal had shown Will.

“Was there only one?” Jack asked.

“I only saw one, but I showed the police where it was, so they’d know better than I do.” He bit his lip, considering the ground beneath his worn feet. Should he tell Jack that he knew about the other case? Was there a correlation, or was this something new, something different? How had Hannibal gotten his hands on a current investigation? Why hadn’t he told Will that the man wasn’t caught?

“Why you?” Jack murmured, but Will knew that it was a rhetorical question. Why indeed? It seemed the coincidences of coincidences, to move away from a murder just to stumble into a new one. Will wondered if he was cursed.

“If…I can say, Agent Crawford,” Will began. Every inch of his brain screamed for him to stop, to resist speaking, but the sight of the hand in his mind’s eye drew the words from him, a siren’s song. “This is the same as the others, right?”

“And how would you know about the others?” Crawford demanded. At that, Will floundered, gritting his teeth. How indeed?

“Tattlecrime,” he said, and Jack cursed, not bothering to care that he was in the presence of a high schooler.

“That god damn Freddie Lounds,” he snarled, and he pinched the bridge of his nose. Will nodded, relieved. As Hannibal said, the lie had to be a good one if you were going to tell it.

“Do you think it’s the same?” Will asked.

“From what I was told, yes,” Jack said reluctantly. “But that’s not important for you. You did a service, calling it in, but that’s as far as you go, kid.”

“He’s looking for connection,” Will said, and Jack paused. The words fell from him, heavy and dark with implications, but he didn’t let that stop him. He thought of Jared Freeman, standing at the edge of the grave, nothing but the depths of the earth connecting him to Miss Avery. “He’s…he’s searching for that. Fungus, they have…mycelium, and when you enter the area they’re in, they know you are there. He grows it on them, and that’s how he can connect us all.”

Jack Crawford stared down at Will, and Will felt naked. The man’s dark, probing eyes stripped everything that was him down to his core, and Will was back in the counselor’s office, explaining Jared Freeman’s love to room full of skeptics. He inhaled, held it, and exhaled shakily.

“Did you see that the same way you saw Jared Freeman’s love for Miss Avery?” Jack asked.

“Yes,” Will replied. He looked to the side where his father was speaking heatedly with the officer, and he nodded firmly. “He reaches out, and he wants the world to reach back.”

“I see,” Jack said slowly, and he frowned.

“If he’s inducing diabetic comas, he’d be a doctor, I think. He’d have to have that know-how,” Will said.

“That’s what we supposed,” Jack said. He sighed, the sigh of a person that’d witnessed too much for his time, and he looked towards the herd of people milling about. “That’s not something for you to worry about, though.”

“That’s because I don’t have diabetes,” Will muttered darkly.

“I appreciate your input, Will. The FBI will handle it from here, but for you…” He shook his head, at a loss. “What can I do for you?”

“Do you have an aspirin?” Will asked. Jack disappeared around the ambulance, and he returned with an aspirin and a bottle of water. Will took it, reaching up to rub the ache that started above his ear and curled over, diving into his other ear. “Thank you.”

“Stick to your house, alright? Try and stay out of trouble. Tell your dad to stick around this time so that I can find you if we have any questions or concerns.”

“I can do that,” Will said. Jack lifted a hand and clapped it on his shoulder, squeezing it. The contact surprised Will, as though Jack was trying to convey something to him that transcended words. He gripped his shoulder, held it tight before he turned and headed into the mass of government officials, taking control with a loud, engaging voice. Will felt the heavy, stifling presence of his father behind him, and he turned around warily.

“Officer said you stumbled on a body in the woods,” Bill said, frowning.

“It was an accident,” Will replied, as though finding a body in the woods was something someone could purposefully do.

“They said they’re going to search the area, but they’ve got it taken care of. Said you’d handled yourself like a full grown adult.” His father lifted the hat off of his head and scratched it, stuffing the hat into his back pocket.

“Thanks,” Will said. Bill Graham didn’t reach out to squeeze his shoulder, but he didn’t reach out to smack him in the back of the head, either. They stood like that, surrounded by flashing police lights, the murmuring of too many voices, and the footsteps of the harried before Will excused himself and headed down the driveway to the house, locking himself in his bedroom for the rest of the night. After a short while, he heard the door to the front room open and close and knew his father was going to do the same.

I stand before Miss Avery, palm pressed to gentle palm. She makes no move to fight me; she makes no move to run. She inhales, and I can sense it, just as easily as I sense the blood pulsing through her veins, just as easily as I can all but feel her lungs expand.

“I reach out to you, and now you reach back,” I say.

“Whenever you enter this place we have found, I feel you near,” she says, and I sigh. It is the softest sound, the quietest of feelings. It is one thing to reach, extend, and grasp. It is another for someone to finally reach back, to see as one is intended to be seen. As one we lay down together, side by side, our breaths intertwining until there is nothing that separates the you from the me. This is beautiful. This is peace. This is my design.

Will woke, and he wiped tears from his cheeks, his breath hiccupping in quiet, desperate gulps. It was a silent grief, something that swept away all chance of sound to escape as it stifled his voice and gripped his throat. He curled up on his side, blanket pulled close, and he wondered if Jack was going to be able to find such a person whose desperation to connect was so dire it was like trying to hold onto sand. No matter how tight his fist, it would inevitably escape through the cracks.

Mostly, he wondered if one day he’d be the one burying someone in the ground. He wondered who would be the one to find it if he did.

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The weekend dragged itself to Monday, a hangman's noose wrapped around its neck. When Will went to go and apply for jobs on Saturday, his father refused with a stern shake of his head. Instead, he found himself sitting on the couch, watching the football game with Bill Graham whose enthusiasm for UGA hadn't changed despite changing states. He didn't have much fight to give, in truth –not with his leg muscles complaining the way that they were. Ten miles was a long run for anyone, even someone in peak physical condition. Although Will was no weakling, peak physical condition didn't quite fit into his description. He'd stood in the shower for quite some time, allowing the hot water to sooth the blisters that'd rubbed into his ankle and the sides of his feet.

Sunday, his father disappeared to spend a day with his new co-workers, leaving Will to his own devices. He considered going to apply for jobs, but when he saw Jared Freeman in the kitchen, staring down at a Hungry Man meal, he quickly forwent the idea. Instead, he found himself staring up at the ceiling of his bedroom, wondering just how long his father's concern lasted. Had it been long enough for him to realize they didn't have much to talk about? Had it been long enough for him to determine that he couldn't do anything about his odd, troubled son? He wanted to be angry, but he couldn't find it in himself to be. He rubbed his aching feet and let the clicks of his eyelids count the seconds until darkness fell.

Monday came, and he escaped to school, relieved to have something to divert him. He met with Beverly near the front entrance, who was accompanied by two younger siblings whose hair and eyes gave them away as such.

"Did you hear about those bodies?" Beverly asked by way of greeting.

"No," Will lied.

"They found five bodies out in the woods!" one boy said.

"They were so gross and decomposing that things were growing up over them," the girl added, nodding. "Things like fungi and mushrooms and lichen."

"These are my siblings, if you can't tell. Henry and Cassandra." Beverly pointed to them, then herself. "I'm the oldest, and there's three more after that, if you can believe it."

"That's a lot of kids," Will said.

"They say the more kids there are, the better the character growth," Cassandra said, grinning.

"Are you an only child?" Henry asked.

"Yes," Will replied slowly.

"We can tell," Cassandra said knowingly.

"Oh, come on," Beverly rounded on them, and they hurried off, laughing as they headed towards their respective classes. "Jeez, sorry about that."

“No, they’re…well, they’re not wrong,” Will said, and his smile felt savage at the edges. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes and looked about the bustling students, out of place and out of time with them. The rain had continued well into the weekend and gave no sign of stopping, switching periodically between heavy downfall and light mist.

“Well, they’re still jerks. They’re right about the bodies, though. They were in Wolf Trap, deep in the woods, hands sticking up out of the ground like claws.” She walked with him towards his locker, and Will grabbed his books, nodding along.

“That’s bleak,” he said.

“Bleak and creepy. Someone joked that whoever did it was just trying to grow a mushroom garden, but those aren’t the kind of mushrooms you’d want to eat.”

“I’ve never had a mushroom that I liked,” Will said, and Beverly laughed.

“Then I guess you won’t run the risk of biting into one of these guys, right?” The bell rang, and they headed towards first period, Beverly breaking away once she reached the right hall.

“Hopefully,” Will agreed.

He found Abigail at lunch, although it troubled him that he sought her out so persistently. Beverly was nowhere to be seen, so he made his way over without interruption, noting how she sat alone. He sat down in the chair beside her and saw a faint discoloring of purple beneath her eyes from lack of sleep.

“How was your weekend?” he asked.

“Oh, it was good…I went to check out a potential university, then my dad and I went hunting.” Her hair was pulled back, up and away from her fair features, and it wasn’t lost on Will how her mouth quivered before pressing shut. She looked like one sharp exhale would blow her away.

“Did you get anything?”

“Yeah, we found a doe,” she said with a quiet, short laugh. “Did you go fishing?”

“Not with all of the rain, no. The river will rise when it’s all done, then I will. That’s the best time to catch them.” They ate in silence, the air dank with unsaid words. It was the sort of silence that chafed, and if Will hadn’t seen what Abigail had wanted to show him, he’d have said he imagined her ever wanting to be his friend. Abigail yawned, Will yawned, and he looked down, studying the inedible-looking pizza.

“Do you do everything with your dad?” Will asked, hesitant. He flexed and clenched his hands, uncomfortable.

“What do you mean?” Abigail asked slowly.

“Hunt together, go look at universities together…you must be really close.” Off to the side, a couple of kids tossed a football, laughter ensuing as they moved towards the center of the eating hall. The ball was quickly confiscated, and the students booed the teacher away.

“Yeah, I’m pretty close with my dad. Are you?”

“No, not really,” Will said. He wasn’t quite sure why he was so bluntly honest with her; her expression of surprise showed that he hadn’t answered the way that she expected. He looked away and took a bite of pizza.

“Are you close with your mom?” Abigail asked.

“I don’t have a mom to be close to.”

“My dad sad you seemed interesting. Maybe you’ll get to see what the hype is all about.” It was supposed to sound like a joke, but the punchline came out wrong. Will looked at her, and her voice caught in her throat, stifling the laughter that was supposed to follow. She forced a breath and grabbed her water bottle, distracting herself by taking a drink.

“Maybe,” Will said. They ate in silence for the rest of lunch, only the sound of rain tapping gently on the skylight above them to punctuate the thoughts in their heads. When the bell rang, he left her to her own devices, wondering just what had happened over the weekend to make her so afraid again.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10:

When Will got to Hannibal's, another car was parked in the driveway. Although it wasn't as new and conspicuous as Hannibal's, it was far newer than Will's –at the very least, it had an auxiliary plug in it. He knocked on the door and noted the Hawaiian floral car freshener wrapped around the rearview mirror and decided that it had to be a girl. He thought of Hannibal's questions regarding his dating life, and he had to wonder –did Hannibal date? Although he'd only seen small portions of the duplex, there was no sign that another person frequented the place.

"Will, come on in," Hannibal said, opening the door. Will glanced at him, then past him where he heard the unmistakable sound of talking in another room.

"If I'm early, I can wait," he said, glancing to his watch.

"No, you're on time, they're late." He ushered Will into the living room where a small group of what had to be college students sat, notebooks and textbooks strewn about in a chaotically organized fashion. At the center of the table, an artfully prepared plate of some form of food rested, sprinkles of herbs accenting the air with a sharp spice across delicately curled meat that looked like the petals of a rose. He recognized Alana Bloom among the crowd. She smiled when she saw him and waved, a pencil tucked behind her ear.

"It's good to see you again, Will," she said.

"A new study partner?" another girl asked.

"Everyone, this is Will Graham," Hannibal said. "Will, you've already met Alana. This is her friend and my new acquaintance, Judy Halpert, and a fellow grad student, Frederick Chilton."

"You're rather young, aren't you?" Frederick noted. While Judy was the antithesis of Alana with bleached blonde hair and brown eyes, Frederick looked to be the poor man's Hannibal. Whereas Hannibal's jaw and cheekbones were accentuated and sharp, Frederick's cheeks were soft, his brown hair the owner of too much product. His nose was long, mildly narrow, and hawkish, set above shrewd, calculating hazel-blue eyes. Will scanned his clothes and noted that though he was well-dressed, there was a somewhat flamboyant fashion to his checkered vest and striped tie, almost an ode to Hannibal's striped vest and chevron tie. Hannibal idled by the chair near Frederick and cast Will an apologetic glance.

"I'm old enough," Will said with a shrug.

"Oh, leave him alone, Frederick," Alana said. "You're just upset that you're the oldest one here."

“Everyone just looks so young these days. I swear the freshmen gallivanting about the commons look like they’ve barely hit puberty, let alone graduated from high school,” Frederick said sullenly.

“Maybe that’s just *your* age showing, not theirs,” Judy teased.

“Will, if you’d like to wait in the study, I’ll be with you in a moment,” Hannibal said before Frederick could reply. Will nodded and headed towards the spiraling staircase, not needing to be told twice. As he ascended the stairs, he heard Judy whisper in a not-so subtle voice,

“He’s legal, isn’t he? I’ll snap him up if he is.”

“You’re already seeing someone, Judy,” Alana reminded her.

“That can change,” Judy said with a snort.

“As fascinating as that is, if we could get back to the task at hand…” Frederick’s voice carried away, and Will hurried up the last few steps, eager to get away from *that* conversation. He entered Hannibal’s study, and he turned on the light, looking about the warm and comforting room with unease. He was horrible with confrontation.

When Hannibal didn’t immediately follow him upstairs, Will perused the room, tucking his hands into his pockets as he peered at the spines of the elegantly embossed books, reading the titles. While most of them were psychiatric in nature, Will was pleasantly surprised to find books on Greek mythology, fantasy, and history. There was a small corner by the window whose shelves housed poetry, and Dante’s works were also present alongside Milton and Chaucer. Each book had been set with care, as though he’d measured just how many books it’d take to fit each shelf without having to cram them. If there was one thing Will would describe Hannibal as, it was meticulous.

A table that set away from his desk held sheets upon sheets of paper, and Will peered down at a sketch, surprised to see a park with various people in it, the architecture of the city rising up in the distance. Everything was realistic, from the swaying trees to the curving sidewalk, and he smiled, taking his hand out of his pocket to caress it.

“See something you like?” Will gave a start and turned, guilty. Hannibal stood in the room, surveying everything as though he could track Will’s progress through the space by sight alone. Will stuffed his hands back into his pockets and shrugged, looking back to the picture of the park.

“It’s lovely,” he said.

“Thank you,” Hannibal replied. “I love art. It has the power to evoke emotions, even if you don’t know the context of what it is that you’re seeing.”

“What is it I’m seeing?” Will asked. Hannibal crossed the room to look down at the picture, passing a hand just above its surface.

“First, what do you feel?” Will looked down to the drawing once more, studying the smooth, confidant lines of the pencil, the shadowing delicate and precise. The lines were fine, as though he’d taken a single hair and dipped it in ink before working.

“You’ve been to this place before,” he said. “It’s as familiar to you as your home, as comforting as an old friend. You know just how many trees, just how many benches and monuments. This place is special to you.”

“That is a park twenty minutes from here that I enjoy going to just before sunset,” Hannibal said affectionately. His fingertips touched the skyline beyond the park, and he nodded. “You are absolutely correct.”

“Did you do this from memory, or were you there?”

“This is mostly from memory, although I embellished the crowd of people moving about. When I close my eyes, I feel as though I could blend right into the spaces between that seem to exist at times like twilight and dusk. There is an almost ethereal presence in that place, although I could not say why. I think we make things that way, with the emotion we give them.” Will nodded and studied the faces, their heads downturned or away from the picture, as though he wanted them to have the potential to be anyone at any given time.

“I think it’s beautiful,” Will said.

“Is that why you keep your hands in your pockets? You prevent yourself from reaching out to touch something beautiful?” Hannibal asked. Will shrugged, although the question stung and buried deep.

“I don’t want to ruin it,” Will replied.

“That says far more about your perception of yourself than it does about how beautiful you find the art,” Hannibal said kindly.

“So you study psychiatry, you play the harpsicord, you make apparently grand and lavish food, and you draw. What else do you do?” Will asked, ignoring Hannibal’s observation. Hannibal laughed and went to the small pitcher of water, pouring two glasses of it.

“At the risk of sounding like I’m bragging, I play the Theremin as well.” He offered a glass to Will, then set his own on the end table by his chair, next to the notebook that had Will’s notes. Will studied it and wondered why he hadn’t opened the book to see what was inside. What sort of notes did Hannibal keep of him? Better yet, did he want to know?

That is impressive,” Will said seriously. “And I’d say that you can dance just as well as any, and you speak several languages?”

“If I say yes to both, are you going to think differently of me?” Hannibal flashed him a small smile.

“Seeing this house, no.” Will took a sip of water, but as Hannibal sat down, he couldn’t bring himself to do the same. He slid his thumb along the edge of the glass and studied the water, contemplative. He was aware of Hannibal’s eyes on him, waiting, but instead of crossing over the rug to sit down, he paced, walking along the bookshelves to find his words within the letters on the spines.

“Is everything alright, Will?”

“No…not really.” He frowned and took another sip of water.

“I apologize for the study group running late,” Hannibal said. “Frederick has a knack for debate, even in the smallest of circumstances.”

“Why did you lie to me?” Will asked, turning to look back at him. His tongue was like sandpaper, rough against the roof of his mouth. He took another sip of water to try and wash down the feeling of grit on his teeth.

“I wasn’t aware that I lied,” Hannibal said. A flash of concern, followed by confusion passed over his face, and he shifted in his chair to better observe Will.

“You gave me photos of a crime scene where a man was growing fungi off of bodies, and I found a gravesite just like that five miles into the Wolf Trap forest,” Will said. He scowled and looked out of the window, noting that the car that’d been previously parked there was gone. “You said that the man had been found.”

“I said no such thing,” Hannibal objected. He crossed his leg over his knee and leaned back into his chair, hands resting casually on the arm rests. “You said that you were comforted by the fact that he was behind bars, but I never said that he was behind bars.”

“You allowed me to assume that he was behind bars,” Will countered, walking over to him.

“Because it gave you comfort. You put yourself into a stressful position in order to better understand yourself as well as your connections to Jared Freeman, and I wasn’t going to shatter the safe space you’d created for yourself in the assumption that he’d been detained by the FBI.” Will opened his mouth to argue, but he found himself flustered, caught off guard. His eyebrows drew down, and he looked to Hannibal’s impeccably shiny shoes.

“You allowing me a ‘safe space’ for comfort made me feel like you were lying when I found those bodies,” said Will.

“I apologize for that. I had no idea or reason to think you’d find a new set of bodies from the killer, so I felt that it was harmless. I can see that you’re upset, though. Are you used to people willfully lying to you for profit or gain?” Will started to lie, but he stopped. He looked down at his worn, fraying belt, and he nodded. He couldn’t very well tell a lie when he was angry at someone else for the same.

“My dad has a habit of lying if he thinks it will buy him time or buy him a way out,” he said. He had to force the words out, a crowbar prying them off of his tongue.

“I had no intention of buying time for myself or buying a way out, Will,” Hannibal said lightly. “I feel that in our study of your mind, I’m going to find myself apologizing a lot –to not abuse or overuse the word or the meaning behind it, I will use it sparingly in order to not sully it by repetition. That being said, I do apologize for making you feel that I was lying to you in a manner that was reminiscent of your father’s behavior.” It wasn’t the most emotional apology Will had ever heard, but it somehow rang truer because of it. Hannibal wasn’t going to overexert himself with flowery or poetic words, and it occurred to Will that it was because Hannibal respected him that he wouldn’t. He nudged his shoe over the intricate, exotic design on the rug, and he sat down in his chair.

“Thank you,” Will said honestly. Hannibal nodded and took that as a sign to open his notebook and begin.

“Before we interviewed the students of your classroom, the FBI agents had us go through the files of each student to see if Dr. Du Maurier or I could spot something among the notes and behaviors. Your file was by far the largest, and I’ve never seen a student transfer so much. You stayed at that particular school for almost four years, but that wasn’t normal.”

“No, my dad had a habit of moving a lot,” Will said snidely.

“What would cause him to move so suddenly?” Hannibal asked. “That many different instances of uprooting you from your education must have made connections to people difficult.”

“Something at work would happen, and we’d move. He’d pay the rent late, and we’d move. He’d get into a fight at a bar, we’d move. I’d get in trouble at school, we’d move.” Will tacked the reasons off on his fingers, setting the glass down. “He’d get wind that maybe my mother was in town, we’d move. He’d get wind that maybe my mother left town, we’d move.”

“With each move, did a new beginning become easier for you?”

“It’s easy for my dad…I already don’t have an interest in people. I don’t…connect the way that others connect. I can’t grasp the mode of conversation or the tone, but I can see exactly why and how she covers arms with her jacket to avoid suspicion. For him, each place is a chance to change out the mask he’s placed over his face, and everything else just falls into line.”

“But not you,” Hannibal noted. “Does he struggle with your lack of social abilities?”

“Oh yes,” Will laughed. It was the kind of laugh that cut short too soon and left room for misunderstanding. He started to say more, but somehow the sound echoed in his ears, and he lost his train of thought. He looked down at his shoes.

“Do you want to be able to socialize with your peers on a level closer than what you feel that you’re capable of?”

“Sometimes,” Will said. “I know that sooner or later, though, I’m going to see something that pulls me right into their head, and I’m not talking to them anymore, it’s like I’m speaking with myself except I don’t exist anymore. When I can finally separate, I have to pick apart what is left of them that clings to me and what I truly am.” His voice lowered with each word until it was only a breath above a whisper; Hannibal had to lean in to catch it.

“Did that happen when you found the bodies in the forest?” Hannibal asked. “Did you go to run, only to be stopped by the chilling sensation that it was you who put them there?”

“No. I thought that I was seeing things, so I kept telling myself that what I was seeing wasn’t real.”

“When did it occur to you that it was?”

“When I kept trying to ground myself in the present situation, and it didn’t change. Then, when the police verified what I saw, I realized that all of it was real.” Will bit his lip, thinking of the horrific call to the police, how he’d stammered and stuttered until they were able to piece his string of thoughts together to understand the horrors that he struggled to convey. The operator made him stay on the line, promising that help was on the way. There was a dull ache in his head, something reminiscent of the day before.

“You don’t trust your mental state, so you rely on others to create the parameters of what is real and what isn’t,” Hannibal said, neither condemning nor agreeing. “Do you trust the average, day-to-day person to accurately create your reality?”

“I try to choose that person carefully…people of authority, government figures, teachers, peers with a stable head on their shoulders. That sort of thing,” Will said wryly. Hannibal nodded, pen artfully turning end over end along his fingers as he thought.

“You sometimes fall into dark places with no end in sight. You need a person that you can trust to help you out of those spaces when you find yourself led in.” Hannibal said at last, closing his notebook.

“I’m trying to trust you,” said Will. “That’s why I wasn’t comfortable with the thought of you lying to me.”

“Do you trust me to tell you reality versus what your mind conjures?” he asked. “Do you trust me to give you the truth of the world, rather than my own truth? Sometimes that line for any person is difficult to find.”

“I’ve been told that that comes with time and experience together. I get to know you better, and it helps me trust you to be that guiding force. I’m trusting you to treat me, and that’s more than what can be said for anyone else.”

“I don’t dismiss that as a crucial step,” Hannibal replied. “I appreciate that you’ve given me such a chance.”

“You say that like it’s a gift.” Will laughed and scratched his neck. Hannibal’s eyes tracked the movement, and he nodded seriously.

“From what I have observed and heard from you, I am of the opinion that any form of attention or consideration from the closed off and unsociable Will Graham should be seen as a gift and handled with care.” Hannibal’s stare was intent, unmasked in its attentions, and Will had to look away; he didn’t want to misunderstand, and he was certain that he was two seconds away from such a thing.

“How old is Frederick Chilton?” He asked when he trusted his voice. He gulped down his water.

“He is twenty-eight, I believe –why?”

“Alana said that he was the oldest in the room…how old are you?”

“I’m twenty-four years old,” Hannibal replied.

“You’re going to graduate from grad school so young?” Will asked, surprised.

“I graduated at seventeen from high school, then finished my undergrad a year early. It was grueling work, but certainly possible.” Hannibal stood and went to the pitcher to refill his water, and Will stayed put, turning the glass around and around in his hands. He pressed his palms to the sides, and he stared down at the distorted whorls and curls of his fingerprints through the water.

“How did you get your hands on FBI files of a man that hasn’t been caught yet?” Will asked.

“Dr. Du Maurier has consulted with the FBI, as you know. If she feels that I can give special insight, she allows me to accompany her to their headquarters. She’s spoken with them on the case, and I merely took the files from her office.” Hannibal crossed back over and sat down once more, setting his glass down beside him.

“Is she going to be angry that you have the files?”

“They’ve already been returned without her ever knowing of their absence,” Hannibal reassured him.

“Is Jack Crawford going to find out that you had them?” Will pressed.

“Only if you tell him,” he replied. He smiled slightly, a crafty twist of his lip that lit up his entire face. “Will you keep our secret?”

It wasn’t lost on Will that Hannibal called it ‘their’ secret. He bit at his bottom lip and considered the toe of his shoe before he gave a short nod. Hannibal nodded with him, and he leaned back in his chair, contemplating Will.

“I’m sure you heard Alana Bloom’s friend comment on your appearance. Do you have such issues at your school, too?” Hannibal asked.

“Not really,” Will replied. “Then again, I don’t put myself in a position where people just walk up to me and start a conversation.”

“No? But you expression is so amicable,” Hannibal stated with such a serious expression that it took Will a minute to realize he was teasing. He stared, and he let out a short laugh, reaching up a hand to wipe it away.

“I have that reputation,” he said, and he peered up at the ceiling, shrugging. “I think relationships like that are just as dangerous as seeing into a killer’s mind.”

“Oh?” Hannibal’s brows lifted in curiosity.

“I bleed into them…people talk about love where you become one in the same, and it’s the ultimate goal for couples, isn’t it? Metaphorically, they are one in the same. Two halves of a whole.”

“It is believed soul mates were once one person that was split apart because the gods feared them. People search their entire lives to find their soulmate; the one that connects to them on a level that defies all forms of logic,” Hannibal stated, folding his arms across his chest.

“Well they’d have a hard time finding theirs because I’d slowly become whatever it was I perceived them to be. They’d think they found their other half, and I’d have an existential crisis trying to put myself back together day after day after day.” Will sighed, shaking his head. He’d been asked out once, by a shy boy who’d written his number in a lovely shade of green ink. Will tried to explain why it was such a terrible idea, but the words came out wrong. He’d ended up apologizing to the trash can, unable to even look at him.

“Believing that you’d have an existential crisis implies you believe in God. Do you?”

“Well someone has to be getting a kick out of what’s happening to me,” Will replied. “Don’t you think?”

“I think God is phenomenally moved by many ironic things. Just last week, he dropped a church roof on over one hundred and sixty followers in Nigeria. Just like that.”

“Do you think he laughed, though?” Will asked. “Do you think he…felt saddened by it?”

“I think he felt powerful,” Hannibal replied. “Anyone in a position of power over another will sometimes push just to see how far they can go while maintaining the same imbalanced relationship.”

“Which is why I won’t date,” Will said with a cold, crippling laugh. “If someone found out that they could literally mold my perception of them as well as my realities, they’d probably play God and drop a church on me.” Hannibal smiled with him, and he nodded, making another quick note on the paper.

After their session, Will turned his collar up to the wind that tossed rain at his back, and he wasted no time hurrying to his car and climbing in. He exchanged the sodden napkin for a dry one at the base of the windshield, and he fired the truck up, windshield wipers unhelpful on the first setting and utterly terrifying on the second. He drove through the rain,

squinting past the glass, and he thought of Hannibal's lie by omission, and his request for 'their' secret to be safe. He figured that out of anyone that he'd met in his life, Hannibal was one of the first he'd ever consider keeping secrets for.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11:

The longer the week went, the more that Abigail opened up. She sought him out when he was leaving for the city on Friday, and once again Will took her along, eyeing her contemplatively as he drove. The shadows that haunted underneath her gaze were gone, replaced by a crafty curve to her lips and a piercing stare.

"Do you have an interview?" she asked when he didn't immediately say anything.

"It's at a mechanic shop…he said he doesn't like hiring young kids, but he needs someone on weekends that isn't going to screw everything up," Will replied. Abigail fiddled with the dials on his radio, not wanting to give up hope that the shoddy antenna could pick up a random station. Will didn't have the heart to crush her.

"And are you going to screw anything up?" she asked teasingly. Will pretended to think about it, shifting lanes to move around a slow driver.

"This past month or so, I'd say that's become a bit of a habit that I've acquired," he said.

"Maybe you need some sort of lucky charm?" Abigail wondered.

"If I get this job, maybe I can consider you a lucky charm," said Will, flashing her a smile.

She stayed in the car when he got to the shop, flashing him a thumbs-up as he adjusted his shirt and made sure that it was tucked in all around. His father had almost deleted the messages on the phone before Will could hear it, and it was only dumb luck that he got the tail end of Mr. Davenson's message before his dad grunted and moved on to the next one regarding a bill that was due soon.

He found a couple of men in the shop, speaking with one another as they looked up at the insides of a car, hands identically placed on their hips. Will hovered to the side, hesitant. When neither said anything immediately, he stepped up and looked up at the belly of the car, too. The problem was easy to find.

"Broken oil filter?" Will asked. The two turned to consider Will, and the older man nodded.

"Can I help you?" he asked.

"I'm looking for Mr. Davenson. My name is Will Graham, and I have an interview."

"Oh, yes, yes. Just call me Joel. How'd you figure?" He looked from Will back up to the underbelly of the car.

“I just fixed a car recently with the same problem. Wrong size filter will pop right off and drain all of the oil. Did the engine seize?”

“That’s what we’re going to find out,” he said. “Well, Dante here will figure it out.” He shook Will’s hand and waved back to Dante, leading Will into the store front proper. It was far better than Steve’s shop, and there wasn’t a hint of any chewing tobacco cans in sight. Where Steve wore grubby jeans and a questionable shirt that smelled of things best left unsaid, Joel’s attire was practical but clean with darkwash jeans, a black t-shirt, and a nametag. He was young, mid-thirties, but he carried himself like he’d been running his business for years.

“I’m going to keep this quick because I’ve got a few vehicles coming in from a bad wreck and I’m short-staffed today,” Joel said. “I need someone on weekends, just for the afternoon rushes that always come in. It’s nothing fancy, but I pay higher than minimum wage. I called your old boss –Steve? He said you were a sullen shit, but you did great work. Is that true?”

“I didn’t know that I was sullen,” Will said sullenly. Joel laughed, a genuine, loud sound that rang out around the room. A customer looked up, startled, but they went back to their smart phone soon enough.

“Well whatever he meant, I was more focused on your customers. Three people complained after you left because they didn’t want to have someone else messing around with their car, and a few others asked for your new address to send you goodbye cards. That’s the kind of customer service that I need, as well as quick hands and a good eye. Can you do that?”

“I can do that,” Will said. “I like working with cars. My dad works on diesel engines at the boat yard, and he taught me everything that I know.”

“Well we don’t get boats in here, but I know who to call if I need help with that,” Joel said cheerfully. He shook Will’s hand firmly, then clapped his free hand on his shoulder, smiling. “You’re hired. How’s nine-fifty an hour sound?”

Nine dollars and fifty cents an hour sounded far better than Steve’s minimum wage back in Georgia. Will filled out the appropriate paperwork, promised to be there by noon on Saturday, and he walked out of the shop with an odd, light pressure in his chest. When he climbed into the truck, Abigail noted the look on his face and smiled.

“Am I your lucky charm now?” she asked.

“Yes,” Will said with a short laugh.

“That wasn’t so hard, was it?”

“My old boss referred to me as a ‘sullen shit’,” he said, firing the truck up.

“You do have a very grumpy look,” she said playfully, “and sad, puppy-dog eyes.” Will muttered something under his breath about puppies, and he drove off towards a fast food

place, picking up food for the two of them. He drove through town, eating fries from the bag while Abigail worked on her milkshake, and when he found the right place he stopped, pleased. He found a bench in the middle of the park, and as he looked around, he nodded in satisfaction. Hannibal's park was even prettier in person.

"Have you been here before?" Abigail asked, grabbing her burger.

"No, but a friend referred me to it," he said, looking about. The curves and dips of the hills were just as gentle and mild as they had been in the drawing. Large river birch trees with green and red leaves swayed in the breeze, and although the sun was high in the sky and hidden by bleak, imposing clouds, Will figured that Hannibal must have also sat the same bench to have imagined such a scene.

"Do you know a lot of people in the area? I don't really see you talk to anyone but Beverly or me at school."

"I know a couple of others, but not too many," Will said. For the time of day, there weren't many people out and about to watch, but Will spied a woman interacting with her friends on a blanket on the ground. They laughed at the appropriate times, their conversation was steady, and there were frequent pauses to snap photos, everyone sporting large, genuine smiles. It reminded him of the photos of people from the 50's, a pseudo-happiness that was easily marketable that everyone could enjoy. Will's lips twitched into a smile, copying them.

"Too many friends sounds awful, doesn't it?" Abigail said sarcastically. "What would you do if too many people liked you?"

"I'd probably never leave my house," Will said truthfully.

"The horrors of being sociable –Will Graham's biggest fear."

"Will?" Will turned at the sound of his name, but it wasn't Hannibal that stood to the side, smiling. Alana Bloom hitched her backpack up higher on her shoulder, and she walked over once he met her eyes. "What a surprise!"

"What a surprise," he agreed uncomfortably. He stood up and looked between Abigail and Alana, and he gestured lamely. "This is Abigail Hobbs. Abigail, this is Alana bloom."

"A friend?" Abigail asked, not standing up. She smiled at Alana.

"An acquaintance," Alana corrected, not unkind. "We have a mutual friend that goes to school with me."

"The friend that referred you to this park?" Abigail looked around, munching on a french fry.

"Did he tell you to come and see it, too? I love this place." Alana looked around, eyes keen on everything. "It's always so peaceful, and not as many students take this path to and from campus."

"You do," Will pointed out.

“I guess it’s because of that that I do,” Alana said with a laugh.

“Do you want to join us?” Will asked, gesturing to the bench. When Alana nodded, he sat down between her and Abigail, shifting awkwardly. If Hannibal had told Alana about him, what all had he said? With her studies in psychology, would she pry? Or would she respect his privacy? He scratched an imaginary itch and busied his hands with his food.

“I hope you’re not skipping school to be here,” Alana said lightly. She rested her backpack at her feet and her purse in her lap, eyes on the distant line of old buildings.

“We have off-campus study halls,” Will reassured her. He thought of Judy commenting on his appearance, and he looked down to his burger, picking at the bun.

“What if we were?” Abigail asked. “Would you rat us out?”

“I suppose not,” Alana said slowly. “Although I’d say that your education is incredibly important.”

“We’re not skipping,” Will said, glancing at Abigail. She had a small, barely discernable smirk on her lips, a hint of antagonism in her tone that made him uncomfortable.

“You just like to look at the scenery?” Alana asked.

“I like parks…it gives a good vantage point to people watch,” Will said, although he instantly regretted it. He scuffed his shoe on the ground, the sole of it sinking into the wet earth slightly.

“Is that your favorite past time?” Alana inquired curiously.

“I…I’m not very good with people,” he revealed, surprised at his own honesty. “This helps me understand them.” Alana nodded, and he didn’t see any judgement in her eyes, although there was a burning curiosity at the edge of her gaze that he didn’t like.

“You know, psychopaths study people so that they can best mimic their empathy,” Abigail said, taking a bite of her food. She chewed slowly and cast him a mischievous glance. “They have to watch people to learn how to pretend to care.”

“I’m not a psychopath,” Will muttered.

“If you were, I’d say your acting is superb,” Alana said with a smile. “I’ve been able to sit in on an interview with a known psychopath, and you hold none of his characteristics.”

“Who did you get to interview?” Will asked.

“His name is Abel Gideon, and he was once a very talented surgeon,” Alana said. “It’s believed that he’s a psychopath, but I am actually of the unpopular opinion that he has a very severe case of borderline personality disorder. That’s what one of my papers is on that Hannibal is helping me with, although we tend to agree to disagree on some psychological points.”

“Never heard of him. I guess I must have missed him in the weekly ‘psychopaths anonymous’ meetings,” Will said, glancing to Abigail pointedly. She smiled serenely.

“I’ve heard of him. Isn’t he that guy that butchered his family?” Abigail asked, grinning at Will.

“Yes,” Alana said.

“So you go around and interview psychopaths,” Abigail said, “and that helps you find them out in the wild?”

“Sometimes it helps you to know the red flags to look out for, but it’s not always easy to see what’s behind the person’s words and behavior. Most people are very good actors when they want to be,” Alana said. She crossed her leg over her knee and adjusted her bag in her lap, brushing loose strands of hair away as the wind tousled it.

“If you think he has borderline personality disorder though, wouldn’t that mean you’ve never actually interviewed a psychopath?” Will asked.

“Touché,” Alana laughed. “I have done a few studies on them, though. Their acting varies on an extreme spectrum, from not very well to so phenomenal that you don’t see it in time.”

“Even Will?” Abigail said, leaning over to look at Alana. “Do you think that he could be a good actor?”

“As they say in Hollywood: what’s your motivation? What’s your angle?” Will laughed at that, and Alana nodded. “Everyone has the capacity to lie and to hide. It really depends on what’s driving them.”

“Do you think you could psychoanalyze him?”

Will opened his mouth to protest, but Alana beat him to it as she shook her head sharply.

“Even if I thought that I could, I wouldn’t. He’s the friend of my friend, and I wouldn’t do him the discourtesy.” Will looked over at her, and she smiled at him.

“I appreciate that,” Will said sincerely. The sunlight broke through the clouds, and a stray beam struck her face, everything in stark contrast with one another. Her blue eyes fought against her dark lashes, and her fair skin was all but caressed by her raven hair that tugged and danced in the breeze. Will took a sharp breath, surprised at the shift and change in her features, and he had the pointed sensation of his heart thumping into his ribs. The rest of the sun came into view, breaking the spell as the rest of the park was lit up, and Will looked over her shoulder instead. She reached up and grabbed her hair, twisting it expertly into some form of bun, and she smiled back.

“When I become a doctor though, I can if you like,” she said.

“I think I’ll pass,” Will said, looking away. Too late he realized that she was joking, and he rubbed his forehead awkwardly, refusing to look back at her. They sat in silence, an uneven sort with too much said on one side and not enough said on the other. Will watched the ladies on their picnic blanket pack up and leave, their hugs and loud calls of well-wishes so sanguine that it made his teeth ache from the sweetness.

“I think we need to head back,” Abigail said, glancing at her watch. Will nodded and stood up, grabbing their trash as Alana gathered her things. She caught his eye and smiled again, holding her hand out to him.

“It was nice to see you again, Will,” she said. “I’ll have to let Hannibal know that I ran into you.” Will shook her hand and nodded, hoping that she didn’t.

“Good luck with your paper,” he said.

“And it was nice to meet you, Abigail,” Alana added. Abigail smiled and shook her hand, although her eyes cut away at the last moment. In contrast to women that’d just left with their laughter, their photos, and their cheer, there was a feeling of discontent, of discord.

“Good luck with your psychos,” she said. When Alana walked away, Will tossed the bag of trash into the bin, and they headed back to the truck quietly. It was the kind of quiet that held thorns that poked and prodded when left alone too long. Abigail didn’t fiddle with the radio, and she sat slumped into her seat.

“Are you okay?” Will asked. He didn’t truly need to ask; it was obvious in the way that she sat and the expression in her eyes that she wasn’t. People sometimes needed the question as an opening though, he’d noticed. Much like his own experience, he didn’t normally speak unless spoken to.

“Do you like that girl?” she asked rather than answer. Will shrugged, the question as off-putting to him as an ill-fitting sweater.

“I barely know her,” he said.

“You don’t have to know everything about her to like her,” Abigail pointed out.

“That’s true,” Will agreed, “but she’s a college student, and I’m in high school. Whether I like her or not is irrelevant.”

“So you *do* like her?” Abigail pressed.

“I think she’s pretty. I think she also sees too much,” he said, and that was the end of it. Abigail said nothing, and he was forced to endure the sound of her silence until they got back to school. It chafed against his skin, unwelcome with its oppressive nature, but he wasn’t quite sure how to mend something he hadn’t realized was broken.

When they reached the parking lot, Will spied her father waiting, and he pulled up beside the vehicle, turning the truck off. He avoided her father’s pointed stare and looked at Abigail instead, at a loss.

“Did I get you into trouble?” he asked, referring to her dad.

“No,” Abigail said, but it was the sort of lie that burned on the way out. Her eyes cut from him to her father, and she let out a quiet sigh, one of defeat. “I’m sorry. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I guess since I’m a psychopath, I have a hard time understanding emotions,” Will said dryly. Abigail ducked her head sheepishly.

“I just think that you and I have a connection,” she said, and her stark honesty took him aback. “Something that I don’t have to say, but something that you completely understand. I don’t know how you see it, but you do.”

Her eyes met his, and Will’s breath caught. Sometimes eyes showed too little, but there were many times that they showed too much. Fear danced at the corners, unmasked and with such clarity that he had the sensation of wanting to run and run far. Shame, then disgust, as though he’d dipped his hands into blood and pressed the imprints to his skin. Underneath it all, an echoing sadness, a despair that clawed and scratched his throat raw, the tears long since overdue. He blinked and looked quickly away, studying the gear shift instead. There were red, raw blood vessels in her eyes, and he knew she’d been crying the night before.

“I may understand the nature of it, Abigail, but I don’t know the details,” Will said slowly, keenly aware of her father waiting impatiently outside. “You should tell me so that I can help.”

“I can’t,” she said, and the tremor in her voice made the hair on the back of his neck stand up. He watched her slowly climb out of the truck, slamming it shut with finality, and he turned to watch her embrace her father before she climbed into the passenger seat of the Subaru. Her father turned, and his steel-cut eyes locked Will in place, holding him prisoner. Very slowly, deliberately, he smiled and waved, and as he drove away, Will had the distinct impression of being marked.

There were many things a person could know, but there were many things a person could have no way of knowing without being told. That was a fact of life. Sometimes though, there were the things that your instincts from a time before civilization ingrained into you, something you could see and understand without having to question it. That was survival. That was animal instinct. Although there was no way that he could truly know, Will knew exactly where Abigail’s father’s sights had landed.

It was just one of those things.

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Work on Saturday was easy. He was given coveralls, a nametag, and a spot to work. Although he was the youngest, it was apparent that none of the other guys seemed to care, let alone notice. It was busy, the music on the stereo blared, and he set to work with tools from the back of the shop. The repetition and ease of oil changes and tire pressure checks carried over to Sunday where the sun finally broke through the clouds, and the day was bright, cheery, and busy. His dad was gone by the time he got home at five o’clock, and he busied

himself with his homework, struggling through history notes and unnecessary essays about checks and balances to distract himself from the fact that he maybe saw his father once a day for an hour at best.

There was still no sign of him by nine, and Will went to lay down, distinctly aware of being alone. Most times, it was nice to have the quiet hold nothing more than a lack of sound. This time though, there was a sour sort of taste in his mouth, something he couldn't wash out. Every time he blinked, he saw Abigail's eyes, a plea in them that she couldn't give voice to.

When he'd mentioned his concerns to Hannibal on Friday about Abigail and her father, Hannibal assured him that it was normal for fathers to be protective of their daughters where boys were concerned. At the innuendo of sex, Will had adamantly assured Hannibal that no such thing had happened, and Hannibal's amusement at his discomfort wasn't lost on Will. If Alana told him of running into Will, he didn't mention it.

Sooner or later, sleep claimed him. He wasn't sure how long he dozed in and out; time was relative, a space between existence. At one point of existence, though, something woke him. He lay in bed, breathing shifting from unconscious, deep breaths to short, confused ones. His bones still felt lazy, his muscles tired. As he started to drift off again, he heard the faint sound of something at his window, a creaking noise that jarred him. His eyes opened wide; a faint *zing* slithered along his veins, beckoning him to sit up in the dark. His clock read 2:13 A.M., the glow of the numbers the only light in the room. He blinked the spots of sleep from his eyes and turned, climbing out of the creaky bed to cross to the window, the hairs on his arms standing up. The window was cool to the touch, and he pressed his fingers to it, peering out cautiously.

Underneath the full moon stood Abigail, her muted clothing thick and warm for the chilly night air. The light above caressed her face, and she stared at him with wide, terrified eyes, an angel of deliverance. Without thinking, Will opened his window and leaned out, concern making his heart jerk about unsteadily.

"Abigail, what's wrong?" he asked, beckoning her closer. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed that while his father's truck still wasn't in the driveway, her Subaru was. That small detail told him that he wasn't dreaming, grounded in reality.

"I'm sorry," she said, and her trembling voice betrayed the truth of the situation. Will leaned back to slam his window shut, but it was too late; from behind him, hands grasped and reached, hauling him towards the ground with the brute strength of practice. He flailed, kicking and clawing, but there was nothing for him to gain purchase on, nothing for him to use as a weapon. In the darkness of his room, he could barely make out the visage of a man cloaked in shadows, that reality causing him to bite at the arm by his mouth, desperation an acid that devoured everything inside of him.

He blinked, and Jared Freeman loomed over him, grinning a terrible, awful smile. He pressed a gun to Will's throat, and Will had the sensation of dying, of death that choked and bound and destroyed. This wasn't Miss Avery, a relationship that transcended time and space. This wasn't release. This wasn't freedom. He blinked again, and the shadowed man held hands of steel around his neck, squeezing, stealing. He kicked and jerked about, but as darkness chewed away at the corners of his vision, he realized that it was utterly too late.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12:

Life came in waves –small flashes of coherency that flickered in and out, passing along his eyelids in a dizzying array. He felt the hum of a car's motor at his cheek, then the shift and slide of a turn as upholstery scratched his skin. Air was difficult, something that had to be focused on rather than autopiloted in the back of his mind. Confusion was a drug, a paralytic. When he opened his eyes, he saw nothing but burlap, and even that swam dizzyingly so that he had to shut his eyes tight again to block out the impulse his stomach had to reject dinner.

There were no words shared around him, no whisper of comfort or threat. Will rolled onto his back, then continued rolling when it connected in his mind that his arms were bound, tied at the elbows as well as the wrist, pressed into his spine painfully. His face and chest bumped against something –a wall? The back seat? Back seat triggered a front seat, which triggered the image of a Subaru. The Subaru with the girl, the girl with the father whose eyes held a thousand lies. Will choked out a breath and went taut against his binds, a tremor racking his spine.

Abigail's father had attacked him. He thought of Jared Freeman, but it hadn't been Jared Freeman who wrapped his hands around his neck to kill him. It hadn't been Jared Freeman to use his daughter as a lure so that Will was distracted enough to incapacitate. At that thought, Will swallowed painfully, throat sore to the abuse of hands whose grip had been practiced countless times. Abigail who all but cried in the night. Abigail who stood outside of his window to better blind him. Abigail had been the lure, and she was a better fisherman than she thought. Rather, she was a better fisherman than she said.

He wasn't sure how long they drove, only that it was far and winding. His knees were tied together, as well as his ankles, and he wondered what sort of hunter's knot had been used to subdue him so easily. There was no way to escape, and quick shuffling of the trunk alerted him to the truth that nothing had been left for him to potentially use. Would kicking out the back light save him, or would it be a speedy end with a bullet from the front seat? Logic escaped him, replaced only by the animalistic fear that said the longer he was captive, the less likely he was to live.

Finally, they stopped. He rolled with the lurch of the SUV and lay there, panting out frantic, painful breaths. Inhale; be calm. Exhale; panic. Inhale; be calm. Exhale; panic. The opening and shutting of car doors wasn't lost on him, but he was still startled enough to shout when furious, unmerciful hands grabbed him and hauled him out of the back of the vehicle, carrying him as though he weighed nothing. Even through the burlap, Will tasted the sharpness of pine and the wet, cool air of nature. He'd been hauled out into the woods. He was going to be planted like those bodies, found later by some whimsical, foolish child. His breathing quickened, fearful.

The door to something scented of rustic warmth creaked and slammed, and his head bobbed against the back of his captor as he was carried up a set of stairs. A second, far more hesitant set of feet followed, and Will was hyperaware of them, enough to note their shorter steps and their lighter path.

"Here we are," a voice said, and Will was slammed against a post, knocking the breath from him. He pressed back against the wooden beam, and when the sack was lifted from his head, he blinked spots of white light out of his eyes, taking in the muted glow of a cabin. He wheezed once, then twice. His head spasmed and jerked back against the post, and when he made eye contact with Abigail, he lost his breath once more.

"Welcome, Will Graham," Abigail's father said. "I'm Garrett Jacob Hobbs." In his hand he held a large, imposing hunting knife, and a voice in the back of Will's head assured him that if he ran, it'd be used without hesitation. He stayed where he was, legs threatening to buckle, sheer will and determination keeping him up. Surrounding them, curled about them protectively, what seemed to be hundreds of antlers hung from the walls, and when Will looked up, a large, blood-stained set sat just above his head.

"Abigail, secure his ties," her father said, and Abigail stepped around him with another set of rope, eyes wide. She took in Will's haggard, terrified appearance, and when he could have caught her eye, she looked away. She stepped around the beam and pulled his elbows back, looping the rope through the opening and tying them behind the post so that even if he could get his hands free, he'd have even bigger trouble with the rest of him.

"I've protective of my daughter, Will Graham," Garrett said slowly, standing still. In the dim light it was difficult to see the expression on his face, although his eyes glowed eerily, effervescent. Above him, the large set of elk horns gave him the appearance of the devil. "And when I see nosy types, I get a little peculiar."

"I w-wasn't…aware that I was being nosy," Will managed to stammer. God, his throat hurt. Abigail kept his legs bound and wrapped the length of rope around the post and his thighs, effectively anchoring his lower half in place as well. She checked the rest of his binds, meticulous, and she moved around the post to cut away the excess rope.

"When you're spending all of this time with my daughter, what else am I supposed to think? You fancied yourself a man to me, then you take her off God knows where without so much as a thought to ask permission?" He should have sounded angry, petulant. He didn't. His words were a script, something he'd recited in his mind without thought to making sure it rang true in voice. Whatever it was he'd decided, nothing Will said would change it.

"I'm s-sorry," Will managed, and he swallowed against the finger-shaped bruises around his throat. Behind Garrett, Jared Freeman stood, smiling proudly. Abigail rose up behind him and moved her hands around the post to check the rope at his wrist, ensuring that it was still tight. As her fingers grazed against his, gentle, Will was shocked when she left behind something small, rectangular, and definitely usable. Then she was gone, striding back behind her dad without so much as a hint of her actions, her head downcast and her hands meek at her sides.

“It wasn’t enough…to take her time at school…you had to waste your time with her later,” he said slowly. Behind him, Jared Freeman nodded in agreement, the jealous lover.

“It wasn’t intentional,” Will managed to croak. He flipped open the phone slowly, carefully. No light beamed and revealed him, and no odd tones sang and chimed away at his back. His eyes flicked to Abigail, and he grimaced. “It wasn’t intentional,” he told her.

“The question is…what to do with you,” Garrett said thoughtfully. 911 was the first thought, but another number pressed on the forefront of his mind, demanding attention. He swallowed again and dialed it, gently and slowly pressing each number with deliberation so as not to attract undue attention.

“You don’t have to do anything. You’ve already proven yourself the hunter,” Will said hoarsely. He hit send, holding the phone to the small of his back, praying that there was an answer. God, if there wasn’t an answer, he was dead.

“The hunter doesn’t let go of its prey once it’s caught. That would be the fisherman,” Garrett said. Behind him, Jared nodded in agreement.

“Behold, the hunter of men,” Jared said.

“If you don’t let me go, though, they’re going to know I’m missing within a day. They’re going to question Abigail because she was the last to be seen with me, and they’re going to find their way to you,” Will said, mouth trembling with the effort of speech.

“Soon enough you won’t have to worry about any of that, Will Graham,” Garrett said. “This will all just be a bad dream.”

“So you’re just going to kill me?” His voice cut off at that, a terrified rush of air escaping him. His stomach clenched. “Just like that?”

“I’m not going to kill you,” Garret said. He turned to look at Abigail, and Will saw her mutely reach forward and take the hunting knife, her grip tight despite how her arm shook. “Abigail is.”

“No,” Will said, and Miss Avery held the knife tightly, an expert in doling death and life anew. Her glance to him was apologetic, and Jared set a hand on her shoulder comfortingly. “No you’re not, you’re not going to…no.”

“I’m sorry,” Miss Avery said, and her wavering voice broke, just as it had when Jared first held a gun to her and pulled the trigger. Blood pooled on her chest, red rose petals that fell and graced the wooden floor below, and Will let out a sob of breath, gripping the phone tightly. Miss Avery wavered, then fell, and Abigail stepped over her, knife drawn, eyes wet with unshed tears.

“Just remember, Abigail,” her father said from behind, wearing Jared Freeman’s face. “You have to honor him, otherwise it’s just murder.”

Will looked at him, and the layers of his face peeled back, revealing the monster underneath. Garret Jacob Hobb's face was taut, tight with excitement, his breath cut short in his throat. He stared at Will hungrily, furiously, a jealous man's rage at the indignity. How dare he? How dare Will get close to his daughter? How dare he become something she could admire, something to love? What was Will but pieces of flesh and meat? What was he but a wasted bit of skin that could easily be discarded in the end?

No, no, not discarded; *honored*.

"You killed that girl and put her back in her bed," he said, and both Abigail and her father stopped, stunned. "You…you put her on these antlers, k-kept her here and, and you…"

"Enough," Garrett chided, and the fury in his voice betrayed him.

"I saw the photos on Tattlecrime," Will said, the words churning about him. "You took her, killed her, then gave her back. You couldn't honor her, therefore you let them honor her death for you."

"We won't be giving you back," he said quietly, a soft, lulling tone. "They won't ever find any piece of you."

"Don't do this, Abigail," Will said, and his voice shook. Abigail stood before him, not an angel of deliverance but an angel of death, of darkness and misfortune. The tears pooled and spilled over her cheeks, a river of grief that she couldn't contain. She met his frantic stare, and her breath hiccupped as she withheld a sob, her hand flying to her mouth to catch it. He shook his head, staring into her eyes as he begged, pleaded. "Don't honor me like this."

"I…I…" she stammered, wiping her cheeks.

"Do it, Abigail," her father said, a seductive whisper as he drew closer. "Just like we talked about."

"I…I *can't*," she cried, and she threw the knife down, turning and running from them, her steps carrying her down the stairs frantically. Her father didn't give her time to get far; he cursed and ran after her, leaving Will with a phone in his hand that he wasn't sure had connected, and a knife at his feet that he couldn't reach.

"No, no, no, no," he chanted, and he struggled, shifting and fighting against the bonds that held him, the knots that worked against him. The phone clattered to the floor as feet thundered down the stairs, and he whined, struggling against the rope, bare feet grasping and dragging the knife closer to him. It was an awkward fumble, but he dragged the knife over, flipping it with the blade up so that he could saw at his ankles, the thick threads breaking easily against the knife fine enough to split a hair. Below, the door to the cabin slammed shut, and he was left with nothing but the sound of his haggard breathing, sweat dampening the top of his shirt as adrenaline began to pump. *Now or never, now or never,* his heart chanted to him.

He jerked and twisted his wrist, giving a cry of pain as he dislocated his thumb and wrenched his hands through the rope. Although still bound to the pole, he pressed back

against it tightly and used the slack rope to slide down, down, down to the floor where he hunched at an awkward twist, reaching for the knife. Close, so close, and he winced as he cut his thumb on the blade. His fingers scrabbled, fat and stupid, and they got hold of the handle, twisting the blade so that he could cut at the rope at his elbows. The angle was awkward, and he dropped the knife several times, but as the silence pressed into his eardrums and screamed, he continued to hack, saw, and pick at the rope, letting out a silent sob of relief as it let loose of him and freed his elbows, giving him full range of arm motion.

He freed the rest of his legs easily, and he grabbed the phone, keeping it open as he slid it into his pocket and ran towards the stairs, ignoring the antlers and horns of those that'd passed before him. His thumb wept blood, and he rubbed it, taking the stairs two at a time and hitting the bottom, every beat of his heart reminding him that the silence wasn't a sign of safety. There was no Abigail; there was no Garret Jacob Hobbs. There was nothing but the sound of his own heart and the scent of his sweat, and he looked across the clean, meticulous cabin with his lungs threatening mutiny against him.

At the table, he spied a large bag, and he inched towards it, senses alive to the threat of someone coming up behind him once more. No one did; he was utterly alone. When he got close enough, he peered in, spying more rope, a hacksaw, and the startling shape of a gun. He didn't think twice; he grabbed it and checked the magazine, putting one in the chamber and heading towards the door, wiping sweat from his brow. If Abigail couldn't kill him, then she was in danger. She knew too much. She saw too much. It was either Will or Abigail, and Abigail had chosen Will.

When he ran out of the cabin, he saw them poised in the headlights, the brilliant light blinding him. He lifted the gun at the same time that Garrett Jacob Hobbs lifted his head, and their eyes met. Their eyes met and he saw a thousand lifetimes, a thousand lives. How many had been taken, how many passed to keep Abigail alive? How many fed his putrid fantasy so that he didn't have to kill her? He held a knife to Abigail's throat, and it occurred to Will that if he hesitated, if he waited, she was dead. Garrett Jacob Hobb's hand moved, a slicing motion of time and enough practice that Will knew this wasn't the first time he'd taken a life, and if he didn't act, it wouldn't be the last.

Will didn't hesitate.

First one shot, then two more. Three followed that, and when it seemed that he wouldn't fall, another two finally took him down, splayed before his car with arms spread and a wild, feral look on his face. Will ran over as Abigail dropped with her father, and he fell to his knees, staring in horror as blood gushed from her neck, spreading, spreading. She cried in pain, and he grabbed her head, supporting her neck as he clamped a hand on the wound and held tight, every inch of skin alive as he shook like a leaf.

"See?" Garrett Jacob Hobbs whispered, a hiss of breath that stung and bit. Will looked to him, hands soaked with the blood of Abigail, and he stared into Hobbs' eyes. "See…?"

He looked down to Abigail whose blue eyes turned white in the moonlight, and he cried, heaving breaths of dread that tore out of him and turned the night air red with death. He cradled her face with his free hand, and he shook his head erratically, spasms of movement that he couldn't control.

"No, no, no, no," he whispered, and he curled over her, protective. "No, no, no, no, *no*…"

Abigail said nothing in return. There was nothing more for her to say.

He wasn't sure how long he sat, poised beside the body of Abigail's father and her steadily weakening heart. It could have been minutes; it could have been days. Each breath reminded him of his failure, an ache that encased his skull and pounded with a vengeance. He was frozen in time, and when the hum of several vehicles sounded from behind him, he didn't move from his spot. Lights illuminated the cabin before him, and he looked up to it, the door opened to the monstrous maw of death within that beckoned, beckoned. The sharp wind blew, and he shivered at the feel of it on his skin, reminding him that he hadn't thought to grab a coat when he'd been taken. Silly him.

"Hands up!" someone behind him shouted, and Will flinched. He didn't lift his hands though, fused as they were to Abigail's neck, the only thing keeping her alive. He waited for the crunch of broken sticks and pattering footsteps, the lights fixed on top of the semi-automatic weapons blinding him as he looked towards them and then down to Abigail, his mouth working but no sound issuing forth.

"We need an EMT here, stat!" one of the men shouted over his head, and someone rushed forward, all but gently pushing Will out of the way. He fell back onto his rear, but he didn't have time to stand on his own. He was hauled up and away from the scene, towards the set of black SUV's that robbed him of sight with their invasive light. He was patted down and turned, and as he lifted his hands to his eyes, he saw before him the image of Jack Crawford slowly but surely flickering into view.

"Will Graham?" he asked, not quite a question. It was more of a statement, a declaration of his existence. Will waited for his eyes to adjust, and he nodded, reaching up to gently touch his neck.

"He…he tried to kill her," he said hoarsely, and he was barely aware of the numb, freezing sensation of his bare feet in the dirt. "He was…did she…?"

"We're going to get her to the hospital, Will," he said, a thread of gentleness in his voice. Will tried to peer over his shoulder to see, but Jack stepped back into view, grabbing his attention. "We need to talk about what happened. Where's your head?"

"My head?"

"Where's your head at, son," Jack prompted. "What happened?"

"What happened…?" Will nodded, and he closed his eyes, images flashing, dancing before him. He opened them, and he saw paramedics carrying Abigail on a stretcher past them, hurrying her to an ambulance.

"Will," Jack said, and he looked back to him, needing something to ground him in place. "Are you hurt?"

“I’m…I shot him,” Will said, holding his aching neck. “He was going to kill her, and I…he killed the other girl. The one that was put back to bed.”

“…Come on,” Jack coaxed, and he took Will by the shoulder to guide him towards the cars. He eased Will into the backseat of one, and a blanket was produced for him. This time, he didn’t shy away from it, needing something to soak up the horrors that danced just along his skin. When Jack realized that he was barefoot, cloth slippers were produced, as though he were about to walk around a crime scene. He hung his legs out of the car, swinging them with short, cold twitches. Will stared down, the image of Garrett Jacob Hobbs falling to the earth repeating in his head, over and over and over again. Each time he whispered ‘see’, Will nodded. He could see. He could see.

“Will Graham,” another familiar voice said, and Will looked up to see Hannibal Lecter before him, his own immaculate form of dress shaming Will’s shoddy, blood-stained pajamas. Will shakily reached into his pocket and pulled out the phone, closing it with a quiet *snap*.

“You answered,” he said, leaning against the backseat.

“I’m glad that I did,” Hannibal replied, moving closer to assess him critically. Will watched, unmoving as Hannibal’s fingertips moved along his neck, noting what had to be already forming bruises. “If I hadn’t, you’d-”

“I’d be dead,” Will said, nodding. He looked at Jack Crawford in the background. “Maybe not me, but Abigail. Someone’s dead.” A pause as he exhaled sharply. “Thank you for acting so quickly.”

“Why did you call him instead of the police?” Jack asked.

“The police have a slow response time. I thought that if I called him instead, he’d know how to reach you or someone like you,” Will explained slowly. The adrenaline was fast fading, leaving him lethargic, aching.

“You trusted me to act quickly,” Hannibal said, and his hand rested on Will’s shoulder lightly.

“I’m glad that I did,” Will replied, mirroring Hannibal’s words. His presence was overwhelmingly warm, somehow bolstering him and grounding him in the reality around him. He closed his eyes, but the still face of Garrett Hobbs flashed up at him, and he opened them, swallowing thickly. “Do you…want a report, Agent Crawford?”

“What am I going to find in there?” Jack asked.

“You’re going to find…a room of antlers. On one of them, there was blood. I think that’s where he mounted the girl.” When he said ‘girl’, bile rose to his throat, and he had to fight to swallow it back down.

“He told you this?” Jack inquired.

"She wasn't right, so he had to put her back. He said they wouldn't find any piece of me…I was just right." Hannibal let go of his shoulder, although he didn't move away. His steady presence bolstered Will so that he could look up at Jack as he spoke.

"That girl you're referring to is part of an ongoing investigation about a series of missing girls. Did he mention them?"

"You never found the bodies, right?" Will whispered. When Jack shook his head, he nodded. "That's because he honored them. You won't find those girls, Agent Crawford… he…he ate them."

"He *ate* them?" Jack repeated sharply.

"You have to honor them, otherwise it's murder," he said quietly. Jack nodded, but Will could see that he didn't truly *see*, not how Will saw Garrett's eyes burn with a need, with a frenzy. He didn't understand, could never understand, and the worst of it was that Will could.

When Jack walked away, he crawled deeper into the SUV and leaned his head back against the headrest, every bone inside of him aching. Something deep and primal told him that he'd almost been killed, but all he could think about was Abigail, and how she could have killed him to save herself, and she didn't.

"Will?" The SUV door shut, and he flinched at the sound, opening his eyes to look at Hannibal beside him. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm not feeling well," he said honestly. "Do you have aspirin?"

"I don't," Hannibal said apologetically. "Do you have a headache?"

"Yes." Will nodded and rubbed his head, nails pressing into his skull.

"Who are you in this moment?" Hannibal asked, and Will knew immediately what he meant.

"I'm Will Graham. Before, I was Garrett Jacob Hobbs. When I held Abigail's neck though, I became Will and Garrett, shifting with each beat of her heart. When the FBI agents pulled me away, I was Garrett. When I saw Jack Crawford, I became Will again." He spoke slowly, informatively, and Hannibal nodded, brows drawn close together in concern.

"You stepped into his place?" he inquired.

"Long enough to see everything," Will whispered. "Long enough for him to see me seeing, and in seeing he panicked."

"That is when he tried to murder Abigail?"

"Yes," Will said with a short, curt nod. "She saw me see, and she couldn't bring herself to do what he wanted. She ran, and the predator gave chase." His hands were cold, clammy, and he pressed them together tightly.

“And how do you feel in this moment?”

“I’m in shock,” he said conversationally. He pulled the blanket tighter around himself. “I woke up to Garrett Jacob Hobbs strangling me, I woke up in the back of his car, bound and covered, and he tried to force his daughter to gut me. Now, now she’s in the back of an ambulance where she could die, and I’m in shock.”

“Her chances are far better than Garrett Jacob Hobbs, though,” Hannibal said lightly. “You stopped him from killing her.”

“I murdered him, Hannibal, I just…” Will leaned forward and pressed his forehead to the back of the driver’s seat, another wave of tremors rushing through him. “I just murdered someone.”

“You defended yourself, and you protected someone else from harm, Will. You did the right thing,” Hannibal said firmly. “No matter the end result for him, your actions were a direct correlation to what he first decided to do to you. Everything that happened after came down to your life and Abigail’s, or his life. The answer was simple.”

“It doesn’t feel so simple,” Will said quietly. Tears burned the back of his eyes, and he opened them to look down at his hands still covered in Abigail’s blood. He turned his palms and wiped them on the blanket, desperate to scrub her life off of him.

“That is because you’re in shock. The adrenaline is fading, leaving you exhausted and questioning. For now, don’t question. But don’t retreat into your own mind, either.”

“Where else would I go?” Will whispered.

“Where would you like to go?” Hannibal asked.

“I’d like to go home…I’d like to go home and wash this blood off of me. Then I’d like to go to the hospital and make sure Abigail lives through the night,” Will said.

“On the way here, Jack Crawford called your home to inform your father of everything that’s happened. Your father wasn’t there, and I’m leery to let you go alone where you will subject yourself to your own special form of cruelty, if I’m being completely honest. I offer my house to you, that you can rest and know someone else is there, should you need it. After you sleep, we can go and see Abigail and be there for her when she wakes up.”

Up ahead, the high beams of the SUV showed Jack walking out of the house, flood lights being carried in by other agents ready to immediately get to work. People moved like ants, to and fro, and someone carried Garrett Jacob Hobbs away in a body bag, their expression grave. He thought of his eyes, cold and steely, and he nodded.

“Okay,” he said, and he nodded again. “Okay.”

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 13:

He was first taken to the FBI to have DNA samples taken, as well as fingerprints and blood. He recognized the agents as the two that'd worked with Jack Crawford in Georgia, and they told light, familiar jokes to one another as they worked, leaving Will to his thoughts. At some point he managed to get pain killers, and he dry swallowed them as they worked. Every time he blinked, a gun fired and left his ears ringing from the sound. They picked dirt and blood out from underneath his fingernails before they let him go, a spare FBI hoodie and a pair of sneakers tossed his way as he went. At least he didn't have to be barefoot anymore.

He sat through the questions, repeating himself over and over until he was able to sign a few papers and leave. Although he wasn't being interrogated, he stared at the large, imposing loop bolted into the table for those that would be handcuffed. If he hadn't murdered Garrett Jacob Hobbs, Hobbs would have been handcuffed there. Jack Crawford stared at him from the other side of the table, and he let out a low, aggrieved sigh.

"If I didn't know any better, I'd say someone had it out for you," he said, tossing down the papers for Will to sign. Will gritted his teeth and accepted the pen, scribbling his name on the line and dating it. Knowing better than Jack Crawford, he agreed.

Hannibal waited for him outside where the sun was steadily rising in the early morning sky. The time was 6:49 A.M., and he dozed in Hannibal's car as he drove, wondering where in the world Bill Graham could be. He hadn't been home, according to Hannibal and Jack. Had he stayed out at the bars? Had he crashed in his car, wisely knowing he was too drunk to drive? Had he found a friend? Had he found a girlfriend? He closed his eyes, and when he opened them, the car had stopped. They'd reached Hannibal's house.

"I have a guest room that I think will be adequate," Hannibal said lightly, opening the car door. Will looked to the house attached to Hannibal's, and he all but stumbled from the car.

"Who lives there?" he asked. Hannibal glanced to his neighbor's house and smiled.

"A wonderful elderly woman that makes gingerbread cookies during Christmas that defy description," said Hannibal, walking with Will to his front door. He opened it to the smell of the remnants of rich, delicious food, and a faint musk of cologne. Before all of this happened, Hannibal must have had dinner guests over. Will walked in and tightened the ties to his hoodie, glancing down to the slightly too small sneakers.

"You don't have to let me stay here," Will said, following him into the living room. Hannibal turned lamps on, setting his coat on a coat rack.

“Nonsense,” he said, heading up the spiral staircase. “I can’t in good conscious allow you to go home alone after such a traumatic event. My job is to help you, Will Graham, and I intend to do just that.”

He was shown a bedroom with sage green walls and thick, feather down blankets, as well as a bathroom adjoining that held a shower as well as a bath. Hannibal fetched him a spare set of clothes, as well as a towel before he hovered in the bedroom, watching Will remove his sneakers.

“I’m directly down the hall and to the right if you need me,” he said, and his calm, serene exterior shifted to reveal a hint of concern. “Don’t fear your nightmares. They are normal, and merely reveal to you what you already know that you struggle with.”

“Thanks, Hannibal,” Will said sincerely. His hands shook, and he fumbled with the laces before he finally just kicked the shoes off savagely. “I’ll try not to make too much of a mess.”

“This house could use it,” Hannibal said with a smile, and he left him to his own devices, closing the door behind him.

Will showered first in order to wash the blood off of his skin. He watched the tracks of pinkish water swirl about his feet, unsure as to which part was Abigail and which part was her father. Where did one end and the other begin? It was indiscernible; all blood looked the same. He blinked, and it was a gunshot. Hobbs looked as surprised as Will did, and as he dried off with a towel, he wondered where Hobbs ended and he began. Although he was only the fisherman, he’d become the hunter for the faintest of moments, and those moments clung to his skin.

He slept fitfully, revisiting the same scene over and over again. He stood before Jacob Hobbs, gun raised, pulse elevated. Hobbs held his daughter, mouth pressed to her ear as he whispered, hissed words of poison, knife to her throat. Behind him, right before Will could pull the trigger, a large, terrifying beast walked up the dirt path, standing taller than Hobbs could hope to be. The stag stared at Will, knew him, and he turned, walking around them in a slow, deliberate circle. On his haunches, feathers grew with the thickness and color of raven’s wings, and when his breath caressed Will’s neck, he closed his eyes.

He woke around eleven, eyes bleary as they stared up at the off white ceiling. Along the edges, sage green filigree curled and danced around itself, and as he dressed he wondered if Hannibal had found such a place by accident, or if he’d designed it to be so ostentatious. Outside of his room, he followed the smell of cooking food, and found Hannibal in the kitchen, making eggs.

“Good morning, Will,” he said, looking up from the skillet. He tossed an egg and caught it on the side of his spatula, cracking it over the skillet without the shell falling in. Will blinked, rubbing sleep from his eyes to see if he saw correctly.

“Good morning,” he mumbled.

“How did you sleep?” Hannibal asked, adding a pinch of spice to the food. It sizzled and popped in the pan, making the room smell divine.

“Off and on…do you always cook like this?”

“As I said before, cooking is its own form of therapy for me. That, and in my travels I’ve come across enough recipes that I couldn’t allow to go to waste.” While the eggs cooked, he moved to the side and delicately sliced tomatoes, his wrist gentle on the blade. Rather than cut them entirely, though, Will watched with fascination as he twisted and turned the tomato, slicing in arcs that turned the fruit into a flower, a rose in full bloom that he garnished with cheese and set on a plate.

“I’ve never seen food like this before,” Will said with a laugh. "Thank you for sharing."

“I always enjoy having a friend for breakfast,” Hannibal said, glancing up at him.

“Can I help at all?” Will glanced to the food as the sausage let out a scream from the heat. He blinked, and Abigail screamed in terror.

“You can sit down and relax, Will. I don’t think you do that enough.”

Will found a bar stool and sat down, sliding his palms along the too big pajama pants Hannibal had lent him. He watched the display of art before him as Hannibal chopped and diced, pausing between moments in order to brew coffee from something that looked like it belonged at a lavish barista counter. When it was ready, he set everything on a tray and led Will to a dining room with a full length table, everything just as gorgeous and rich as the rest of the house. He studied the cobalt blue walls and deep, ebony furniture, and he laughed a little as he sat down.

“What’s so funny?” Hannibal asked, setting the plate before him.

“Your house is just…it’s beautiful. How did you find it?” Hannibal smiled, setting his plate down, as well as a carafe of orange juice that Will witnessed him fresh press.

“It was a lucky find, if I’m being honest. They allowed for painting and decoration, so I took advantage of it and decided to make this house a home. I may be in college still, but why must one suffer a lack of art and culture while they’re getting an education?”

“I think most people can’t afford to not suffer a lack of art and culture while they’re getting an education,” Will said dryly.

“Then I feel a duty as well, to hold such things in my home so that when they visit, they may be able to enjoy here what they couldn’t anywhere else nearby.” He poured Will a cup of orange juice and smiled, gesturing to the food. “It’s nothing fancy, but a protein-packed meal was the order of the day, I felt. Sausage, egg, braised tomato, and peppers.” Will took a bite of it, studying the display on his plate.

“What sort of sausage is it?” he asked after he swallowed. “I don’t think I’ve had it before.”

“A certain breed of pig I found at an Italian butcher’s gives off a spicy, aromatic flavor. I couldn’t resist treating myself to it,” Hannibal said. Will nodded and spooned up another bite, smiling wryly.

“I almost feel guilty for eating something you worked so hard to present to me. It’s an art form in itself,” he said, gesturing towards his plate.

“That is why it must be consumed. I feel that art in all forms must be consumed in order to be fully appreciated. That is why we gaze so long at paintings, and why we wish to covet a beautiful person. Art is not meant to merely be glanced at and moved by. It has the power to move us, and in being moved, we owe it to find a way to take it in all of its entirety.”

“You make this art easy to be consumed,” Will said, taking another bite.

“I appreciate that, Will.” Hannibal smiled, a sly turn of his lips.

After breakfast, Hannibal took him home. Will considered calling the school, but he figured that they’d find out soon enough when news was brought to them about Abigail Hobbs. His father’s truck wasn’t in the driveway, and he uneasily hesitated at the door, shifting his stance.

“Do you think he’s alright?” he asked.

“Do you have the number to his workplace?” Hannibal asked in return. Will nodded and walked into the house, eyeing the bed that’d sat untouched in the front room for the night. Hannibal followed him in, and if he thought anything poor of Will’s way of living, he didn’t say it. Will avoided watching him look about, and he found the telephone, scrolling through the list of numbers before he found the right one and hit the talk button.

“Yeah?!” A loud, brash voice answered. The sound of machines whirring and saws hacking drowned out his tone and made him unrecognizable. Will jerked the phone away from his ear and grimaced.

“Is Bill Graham working today?” Will asked.

“What?!”

“Is Bill Graham working today?” Will said, much louder. There was a pause, then the sound of shouting before some of the machines died down, making his ears ring.

“This is Bill,” his father said. From the background, Will heard,

“Sounds like someone you owe money to!”

“Hey, dad,” Will said, aware of Hannibal crossing behind him in order to sit in the kitchen. “I just called to…did you come home last night?”

“No, I slept at Trent’s since I knew you’d be sore if I drove,” he said, and laughter filtered in from the background. “Why? Everything okay on the home front?”

Will started to say no; he started to give his rehearsed speech that’d crowded his mind on the drive over. He started to say, ‘Because you weren’t home, a man came into the house and kidnapped me, and you weren’t there to stop him. I almost *died* and you weren’t there to stop him and help your own *son*, you fucking *gambler*, you fucking poor excuse of a *father*.’

He shook his head. It’d change nothing. Bill Graham in Wolf Trap, Virginia was a gambler, not a father. Will’s situation had stressed him to the point that he had to begin anew, and that rebirth didn’t include paternal instincts. He’d have to try again the next time they moved, when his mistakes were once again too much for his father to handle.

“Yeah, everything’s fine. I just wanted to check up on you. Sentimental things, I guess.”

“Thanks, son; I appreciate that,” Bill said.

Will hung up and looked over at Hannibal morosely. Hannibal gave nothing of his opinion away. If he judged Will for lying, he gave no voice to it. He merely watched, and somehow the passive acceptance was even worse. Will went and quickly changed into his regular clothes, ignoring the signs of a fight in his room, and he returned, sliding his jacket on.

“I’d like to go and see Abigail,” Will said.

They drove together to save gas, and Will leaned back against the seat, brooding. Hannibal’s car was not only a full leather interior, but the seats had warmers, and there was a computer display right above the temperature gauges. He’d have made a comment about how expensive it must have been, but at this point Will was of the mind that Hannibal could afford almost anything that he set his mind to.

“Do you often keep the burdens of the father and the son on your shoulders?” Hannibal asked in the quiet. Will opened his eyes and squinted out to the sunlight.

“He’s busy,” he said.

“He’s absent,” Hannibal corrected. “If he’d been in your home, he could have prevented certain events from unfolding.”

“Do you want me to be angry with him?” Will asked incredulously.

“No, I suppose I feel enough of that for the both of us. You have enough to worry about.”

“*You’re* angry with him?” Will raised his eyebrows, surprised.

“We’ve only been working on your mental state for a about a month now, but I do see you as more than a case study for my thesis. I’m beginning to see you as a friend.”

“But you’re my therapist,” Will objected.

“As I’m not a psychiatrist, I can’t be your therapist,” Hannibal disagreed.

“Then what do you call the meetings every day in your study?” Will asked.

“Conversations,” Hannibal said after a moment of thought. “We have in-depth conversations.”

“And that makes us friends?” Will asked. Hannibal laughed, delighted.

“Normally, after so many conversations, that tends to happen. If we need to, we can stop. God forbid we speak too much and become friendly with one another.” Will wanted to fight against his sarcasm, but out of the corner of his eye he saw Hannibal smiling, and he couldn’t help but smile, too.

There was an FBI agent in Abigail’s room, but he nodded and stepped out after Hannibal spoke with him. Will hovered in the doorway, looking about the pristine and chemically cleaned room with trepidation. He blinked, and he sat in a pool of Abigail’s blood, desperately holding onto her life. He blinked again, and he stood behind her, slitting her throat. He shook his head and walked in, clearing his throat to try and banish the thoughts in his mind that it should be *him* in the ground, not Garrett Jacob Hobbs.

She’d been cleaned up since the night before, no indication of severe wounds apart from bruising near her temple. A thick bandage hid her neck from scrutiny, and a feeding tube rested in her mouth. She looked peaceful, a natural sleep rather than a near-death-induced one. Will reached out and gently touched the top of her cheekbone, brushing a stray eyelash away. His heart was in his throat, clamoring to escape, and he had to turn and sit down on the couch, legs giving way.

I didn’t honor her. I didn’t honor her, and now she lays here, straddling the line between life and death, between a half-life and a sacrifice. The other girls were stand-ins, a poor man’s daughter, and they couldn’t sustain, they couldn’t carry me through the darkness so that I could find her again. I am remiss, and all that remains is to place my hands around her neck and end her agony. If I can end hers, I can end mine, and all will be well. Everything’s going to be okay.

“Will?” Will looked up from his hands, and he scooted to the side so that Hannibal could sit beside him. He self-consciously rubbed his palms into his jeans to remove any trace of her, and he stared at her still form, shuddering.

“How are you feeling?” Hannibal asked.

“Guilty,” Will whispered.

“Why?” He crossed one leg over the other and tilted his head, gaze intent on the girl in the hospital bed. “What’s crawled into your head to make you feel that way?”

“I feel like I’m the one that put her there,” he replied, and he looked down to his hands.

“You did put her there. If you hadn’t put her there, Will, she’d be somewhere far worse.” Will nodded, but the words didn’t connect, didn’t piece together the way that they should have.

“Where’s her mom?” he asked when he could find his voice.

“Her mother was found dead in their home when the FBI raided it. It appears that she’d been dead for several hours, the first kill of the night before Garrett Jacob Hobbs came for you.”

“And now she has no one…” Will murmured, and he buried his head in his hands. “I took them away from her.”

“She has you,” Hannibal said, tilting his head slightly as he observed her. “She also has me.”

“You?”

“You feel beholden to her, don’t you?” At Will’s curt nod, Hannibal nodded. “As do I.”

“Why?”

“You were there when it happened. You were both her father and her friend, her killer and her rescuer. When I answered the phone and heard your voice, I heard the voice of Garrett Jacob Hobbs as well, and I stayed on the line. I stayed on the line until you hung up the phone right in front of me.” At Will’s shocked expression, Hannibal’s lips flattened to a pained line.

“You were there?” he asked.

“I heard your panic, your fear as she presumably held a knife to you. I heard her run from him, and I heard you realize she was in just as much danger as you were. I heard your footsteps, and I heard the gunfire.” Hannibal looked down to his hands as Will had, as though he were the one to squeeze the trigger. “I heard you weep as you held her, struggling for breath that couldn’t come. I imagined you trembling as I sat in the back of the car, and I felt as though I were the one to hold her for you so that you could cry. Each second that passed as you fought to keep her alive, I was there.”

“You heard everything?” Will pressed.

“I heard every word,” Hannibal murmured. “I have never felt quite so helpless as that moment, hearing your struggle without a way to help. I was just as afraid as you were, that each new second would bring the end of Abigail Hobbs.”

They both looked at her on the hospital bed, various machines and electronics doing their best to keep her alive. Will blinked, and he wondered what would have happened if he

had tried to help Miss Avery the way he'd tried to help Abigail. Would Jared Freeman have killed him, along with Miss Avery? Could he maybe have prevented what happened as Jared forced her final moment to be one of terror? Or had he fallen into Jared's mind so far that if he'd been able to stand, he'd have taken the gun and done it for him? As he looked at Abigail, his hands held tremors as he wondered if he'd have killed her himself if the FBI hadn't gotten there in time.

"Thank you for being there for me," he said quietly.

"May I ask a personal question, Will?" Hannibal asked. Will nodded, a short jerk of his head.

"When you stepped into the place of Garrett Jacob Hobbs, how did it feel?" Will tilted his head back and looked up at the ceiling, teeth dragging over his chapped lips.

"Hungry," Will replied. Then, "Powerful."

"And when you shot him, were you repulsed by yourself?" Will closed his eyes, and he clenched his hands tightly in his lap. He knew the right answer to give; killing doesn't feel good. Murder doesn't feel good. No matter the cause or reason, there was no joy in the taking of a life. He inhaled deeply, swallowed the chemical-ridden air, and he sighed.

"Powerful," he said. Then, "Good."

"Knowing that, how do you feel now?" Hannibal asked. Will opened his eyes and rubbed them, knocking his glasses askew.

"I feel like there's a reason I should be in therapy," Will said heavily. "Meaning I should probably continue to see you."

"Doing bad things to bad people feels good," Hannibal said, and Will looked over to him sharply. "Don't you think?"

"Have you ever done something bad to someone bad?" Will asked suspiciously.

"No," Hannibal said, "but I can imagine." He looked over to Abigail and smiled serenely. Will didn't have to question whether or not he was imagining what he'd have done if Garrett Jacob Hobbs had stood before him rather than Will.

"She's going to hate me," Will said after the silence felt too heavy.

"She's going to be grateful to you, but you did take her father from her. You told Agent Crawford that he was eating other girls. Did they look like her?"

"I only saw the photo of one on Tattlecrime, but she looked very similar. Just, you know, dead." Will laughed humorlessly.

"I've only heard small pieces because of Dr. Du Maurier's work, but the girls fit the description of Abigail very closely," Hannibal said.

“So he killed them so that he didn’t have to kill her. When she couldn’t become him, though, he had to finally take care of her, too?” Will shook his head, disgust curdling his gut. “To what end?”

“That is the question, isn’t it? I’m sure that even if Abigail knew, she certainly wouldn’t say,” Hannibal said. “Why did you say that he returned the other girl?”

“There was something wrong with her,” Will said, tasting copper. He’d bit the inside of his cheek.

“So he couldn’t honor her?” Hannibal clarified.

“He was eating them…so there must have been something wrong with her. Maybe she was sick, maybe she was…imperfect.” Will shrugged, and he looked at Hannibal. “I don’t want to think about it anymore.”

Hannibal studied him and reached up, carefully adjusting Will’s glasses on the bridge of his nose. “Then we won’t talk about it anymore.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for everyone's feedback! :) You guys are amazing

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 14:

Will spent the night at the hospital, and he didn't go to school the following day. Hannibal left him with parting words of general comfort, and he tossed and turned that night on the too small couch with a crick in his spine. He woke, stared at her still form, then stared at the stag that stood just at the foot of her bed. It blinked large, dark eyes the color of bottled ink and turned, walking out of the hospital room with heavy, surefooted steps. By the time that Will got up to follow, it was gone.

He stood in the small diner off to the side of her room, blinking at the dour light from the fridge. Everything inside was for the guests, a nurse had assured him, and he could help himself. He grabbed two juice boxes and a cheese stick before he shuffled back, blinking the remnants of his dreams from his eyes.

Jack Crawford stood in the room, studying Abigail pensively. He turned at the sound of Will's footsteps, and he nodded towards Will's jacket that'd been abandoned.

"Thought I'd find you here," he said by way of greeting. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm alive," Will said, as though that were all it took to be well. When he'd gone to the restroom, he'd ignored the livid, large black marks of bruises along his neck. He'd have to get a scarf to hide them until they faded to something less obvious.

"Yes, you are," Jack agreed. Will sat down, and he strolled over to him, a casual step that was belied by the tense, taut hold of his shoulders.

"We found evidence of the girls he kidnapped in his home," Jack said. "Nothing obvious, but there was the hair of one in a throw pillow, and in a small container of what seemed to be putty, we found traces of human DNA. We're scouring everything now."

"Good," Will said passionately. He grabbed his glasses and slid them on before he forgot about them. Jack shifted from one foot to the other, itchy about something.

"I know you're going through a stressful situation, Will, but I needed to ask you a few more questions," Jack continued, studying Will as though he could strip him down by looks alone.

"Shoot," Will said, opening his arms. His dry smile was lost on Jack, too dark for comfort. He lowered his arms and leaned back into the couch.

"Was there any indication, from what you heard and saw the other night that made you think that Abigail Hobbs was involved in her father's activity?" Jack asked. Will wasn't

sure what question he was expecting, but that wasn't it. His gaze cut to Abigail, still sleeping, then back to Jack with a disappointed frown.

"No," he said slowly. "No, she wasn't involved. He tried to force her to kill me, but she couldn't."

"He may have tried to force her to kill others in the past, and I need to know if she knew anything at all and kept quiet. Do you think she could have been an accessory? A lure?" At the mention of a lure, Will's blood ran cold, and he had to fight to keep his facial expression the same. A lure, a lure; Abigail Hobbs had been a lure. He swallowed with difficulty and shook his head, aware of the way the air pressed too tightly against his skin.

"I don't think so," Will said slowly. "She looked just as afraid and surprised as I was."

"Her mother was murdered before they made their way to you," Jack said, as though that explained anything.

"All that says to me is that he killed her mother in a fit of rage and then dragged her off to find me," Will said.

"Why you?"

"Because I was becoming her friend, and he didn't like the competition," Will retorted sharply. He reached up to tug at his hair, then paused and ran his fingers through it instead. "It wasn't like those other girls. Those were replacements of her, but I was…getting in the way."

"Getting in the way," Jack repeated, and he rubbed his mouth to rub away whatever thought followed that. He placed his hands on his hips and looked back to her, brow drawn down dangerously. "And you're sure you're not just protecting her? You wouldn't lie to me to save her life?"

"I watched her almost die because she refused to hurt me," Will said curtly. "She wasn't part of those other murders."

Jack nodded, and he looked to be at the edge of something. His piercing eyes scanned the room, searching, and he shook his head, tucking his hands into his jacket pockets. Never let it be said that Will wasn't nervous; he waited for the shoe to fall, the ball to drop. Liar, liar, Jack would cry, and Will would be an accessory, too.

"I need your help with something, Will," Jack said slowly. The words curled from his lips like molasses. "I've asked Dr. Du Maurier and Hannibal Lecter about you, and Dr. Du Maurier informed me that she's recently passed the study of your psyche onto Hannibal, as she was too busy to be of service."

"Yes," Will said, uncertain.

"He informed me that the past comments you've made about the minds of these people have to do with something like a hyper-empathy, where you can see into their minds

as though you were there, too."

"Sometimes," Will replied reluctantly.

"Well that sometimes allowed us to recently make the arrest of a Mr. Eldon Stammets, the culprit of the bodies that you found. It also allowed us to know where and how to search for remains of the girls that Garrett Jacob Hobbs abducted and murdered, and it gave insight and understanding to Jared Freeman."

"I don't understand what you're getting at," Will said sharply. He scrubbed at his eyes behind his glasses and peered up at Jack, resisting the urge to stand up so that he was level with him.

"You say that Abigail Hobbs wasn't part of her father's behavior and activity, and I'm inclined to believe you. I'm also inclined to ask you to come with me and see something, and give me some insight as to what I'm seeing."

"What sort of…something?" Will asked. He didn't care for the look on Jack's face.

"A crime scene. I think there may have been another victim in Garrett Jacob Hobb's killing spree the other night, but I need it confirmed."

"You think my brain is the thing that can confirm it?" Will inquired skeptically. He stood up and grabbed his jacket, a mechanical act that puzzled even himself. He wasn't willing to admit that he'd sub-consciously already agreed to help without knowing the details.

"I'm willing to give it a try before this spreads all over the news. Is it the same killer, or is it someone new? I need you to tell me. You're over eighteen, so I don't have to get parental consent."

Will didn't bother to tell him that his dad probably wouldn't notice that he was gone anyway. The Wolf Trap Bill Graham probably hadn't even checked to see if Will was in bed when he came home, let alone care that he was stomping through crime scenes all across Virginia.

He rode in the front seat of a sleek black car, non-descript like the rest of the FBI. Jack played jazz music, a light background noise that made the silence not so tense. He drove out past farms and miles of trees until he turned onto a dirt road and took him out past a large, unassuming field in the middle of nowhere. Other vehicles parked there, and a dozen or so agents moved about, caps and jackets on against the breeze.

Will followed Jack through the myriad of cars until they reached a roped off area warning people to not approach. At the sound of Jack's whistle, his men moved away, casting looks of confusion and curiosity Will's way. He ignored them, just as confused and curious as they were.

He walked closer, and he smelled her before he saw her; the sickening tang of blood, the heated stench of dead flesh. Then, the gristly appearance of what a chest cavity looked

like while missing vital pieces came into view, mounted on the head of a long dead and stuffed stag. Will was glad he'd only managed to drink one juice box; it threatened to come back up.

"Are you supposed to be showing things like this to people like me?" Will asked shakily. She was naked, arms spread with the force of how she'd been impaled, eye wide to the sky. She was brunette with brown eyes, and her mouth hung open in a scream that would never be heard.

"What do you see?" Jack asked.

"I see a dead woman impaled on a stag and missing lungs," Will said, taking an unsteady step back. "Not a hand in the dirt, not a…not the confession of a psychopath, but a real person."

"You saw your teacher, Miss Avery, after she'd been killed. You saw Jared Freeman," Jack said, and when Will took another step back he lifted his hand and pressed it between his shoulder blades. "Can you look at her and tell me what you see?"

"I see pain," he whispered, and he shook his head. "I see real, tangible agony. I hear her scream suspended in the air, strung up on a fine wire."

"One of my guys said her lungs were taken out when she was still breathing," Jack said with a nod. "What else? Is this Garrett Jacob Hobbs?"

Will wanted to run. In that moment, staring at the bare and exposed body of the woman, he wanted to run and run far. He wanted to run until his legs gave out, until his breath no longer could come. The air about him was frozen in time, and that time held nothing but pain and the inevitable end that caught up with everyone eventually. At the mention of Abigail's father though, his feet dug into the earth. He couldn't run; not from that. He let out a slow, rattling breath.

The waves are slow, a steady pulse that comes only when ready. In one breath, I am Will Graham, and in the next I am not. I am nothing, and the next wave tells me that no, I'm not nothing. I'm something; I'm someone. A golden radiance touches me, washes away everything that once was so that it could become something anew, something better. Something stronger.

Something smarter.

This is not honor. This is not consumption of all the parts so that it can be laid to rest. This is covetous, and this is greed. This is anger, condescension in its proudest form, and I'm elated by it. Are we not the apex predator? When we see, do we not consume? When we touch, do we not wish to take, to triumph?

There is no mourning in this loss. It is art in its rawest of forms, a tribute to what once was and what can never again be. Pigs pass by the thousands, the millions to the slaughter daily, and not one tear is shed for them. There are no tears for her here. There is no mourning. There are only silent screams, wide eyes and heart palpitating as her time comes

its final, beautiful moments. Death is intimate, although it is detached. No one else in the world shared her final breath, saw the moment that her eyes went dim. One such as Garrett Jacob Hobbs could not do as I do. He was too soft, too moved by things that could not move back, and I am something greater, something stronger. Can't you see?

I am so much better than what he intended to be. This is my design.

Will jerked from his trance, surprised to find himself peering down at her glassy, lifeless eyes. He gave a start and stumbled back, bumping into Jack who stopped him with steady hands. Jack stared down at him, and the knowing expression on his face said he knew Will had something.

"Well?"

"He…this isn't Garrett Jacob Hobbs," Will said jerkily. "He didn't do this."

"How do you know?" Jack asked.

"This person…he thought this girl was a *pig*. He thought she held the same worth as animals, which is why she was butchered like one." Will raked his fingers through his hair to try and dispel the euphoria, the joy at the artistry. "Hobbs *loved* those girls, just as he loved Abigail."

"He loved them?" Jack asked dubiously.

"In his own way, they were his daughter. He loved them, so he honored them by using every…every part. This person saw that, *knew* that, and had to contradict it," Will said. "He thinks they're animals, to be taken as he sees fit, whereas-" His voice cut off, and he nodded, everything clicking into place. He could see. He could *see*.

"Whereas…?" Jack prompted.

"Those girls were sacrifices, Agent Crawford. When you sacrifice something, you choose the best of the stock to give to the gods. You find one unblemished, and when it's sacrificed every part is used. The girl that was put back had something wrong with her, didn't she?"

"Cancer," Jack said with a nod. He stared at Will with fascination, but Will wasn't paying attention to that. He circled the stag head and pointed at it, at the girl whose arms were spread for her salvation.

"He was killing them so that he didn't have to kill Abigail, but he felt sorry for killing that one because she couldn't be used and honored as she should have been. This man, though…he doesn't care." Will threw his hands up, and he could see. "He doesn't care who you are or what you do. We're all just…we're all just pigs to him."

"Do you think he was glorifying Hobbs' work, then? A copycat?"

"No, *no*, this one is…he's smarter than Hobbs," Will said. "He knows he's smarter, and this is just a game. The method itself is just artwork to him, as nuanced and varied as his

moods. As long as they die in the end and he gets what he wants, all is well."

"So you'd say that if and when he strikes again, he would change his pattern?" Will nodded curtly, a single jerk of his head.

"He'd change it every time –apart from taking his *trophies*, he'll change it. This isn't the first, either…this is experience. This is time and confidence. This is a display to end all displays."

"Hobbs kept all of his abductions and behaviors a secret," Jack said to himself.

"And this man wants you to see it. He wants you to see it, and he wants you to know about it. He put it in the field so everyone that passed by would have to witness. This was theater…this is like a play," Will said, and he had to suppress a hysterical laugh.

"This isn't Garrett Jacob Hobbs," Jack murmured.

"This isn't Garrett Jacob Hobbs," Will agreed, and he stuffed his hands into his jacket pockets, ignoring the thrum of pleasure along his spine as he truly *saw*. "But he's something even worse."

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He was driving home when he saw a dog in the road. At first, Will thought to tell himself that it wasn't real; after everything that'd happened, he had to be imagining things once again. After the last two times of him being proven wrong, though, he found himself pulling his truck over and leaving the lights on, watching the dog move about the road skittishly. It didn't seem injured, but it was definitely scared, shifting and hopping back when Will tried to grab him.

"Come on," Will coached, but the dog leapt away last minute, a low whine issuing from its maw.

"You're going to get hurt," Will urged to the dog, moving off of the road when he saw lights. The dog moved to the opposite side and observed him, tilting his head. The car passed, and the dog took off, following the back lights. Will watched the dog rushing off into the dark, and he shook his head, climbing into the truck and driving away.

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Abigail was moved to a psychiatric hospital now that she was stable. She still hadn't woken up, but the doctor assured him that she would, and that everything was going to be okay. For her sake though, after such traumatic events, they wanted her in a controlled environment with specialists to aid her when the time came. Will was given the address, and he kept it in the jacket pocket right above his heart. As he drove, he periodically reached up to touch it, to remind himself that it was there.

His dad was surprisingly home when he got home. Bill Graham looked up from the couch, and two other heads popped up, foreign and unwelcome.

“You’re home late,” his father said, and the other men nodded and shifted about, getting comfortable. It was clear that they’d been drinking, from their flushed faces to their unfocused eyes.

“I was working on a project at school,” Will lied. It should have made him feel guilty to lie, but it didn’t. Clearly Jack Crawford knew not to call, and clearly the school wasn’t going to question his absences just yet.

“I brought the guys over for poker night,” Bill said, and Will nodded. Poker night was going to perpetually be every night from now on, it seemed.

“Nice to meet you,” he said to them, darting into the kitchen. A man closed the fridge door and straightened, casting him a curious glance. Will ignored him and reached into the cabinet, grabbing the painkillers and a glass of water, swallowing them. He could feel the incoming pressure, the ache in his neck that said a headache was fast approaching.

“In there’s Charlie, then out here’s Vince and Toby. Y’all can figure that’s my son,” Bill said to them. Charlie hovered in the kitchen and popped the tab on a beer, taking a sip while the other two murmured their assent.

“He don’t look like you,” Toby said.

“Takes after his mom,” Bill grunted.

“Mom take off?” Vince asked.

“What woman doesn’t?” Bill wondered, and the three erupted into laughter, the noise drowning the TV out. Will grabbed a TV dinner and tossed it into the microwave, turning it on. It seemed talks of mom were going to tread down dangerous road; Will would eat in his room for the night.

“Do you remember her?” Charlie asked quietly. He was younger than Will’s dad, early thirties with sandy hair and green eyes. His shifty, darting hands turned the cold beer about before he took another sip.

“No,” Will said, turning to watch the microwave. Instead of crossing into the living room, Charlie stayed in the kitchen, leaning against the counter.

“Does it upset you when he drinks so much that he speaks of a woman you don’t recall?” Charlie asked. His voice was velvet smooth, a silky cadence to it. Will glanced back at him, then turned to look back at the slowly cooking dinner.

“I don’t care,” Will said.

“Liar,” Charlie said. Will chewed on the inside of his mouth angrily. “I’m good at seeing liars.”

“Are you?” Will sneered.

“I am,” Charlie affirmed.

“That’s good for you,” Will retorted, and Charlie laughed. His voice was too low for the others to hear, a gentle, lulling sound.

“Are you going to lie about what happened to your neck, too?” he asked.

“An accident,” Will said. Charlie nodded.

“You weren’t working on a project at school so late, and that was no accident that put choke marks on your neck,” he said. Will opened the microwave and took the package out, ripping off the plastic and tossing it back in, hitting ‘start’.

“Why would I lie about that?” Will asked.

“That’s the question, isn’t it? Don’t worry, son of Bill; I won’t tell.” Charlie huffed a laugh and looked out towards the TV. “We didn’t even know he had a son until you called the yard.”

Will figured as much. He leaned against the counter but didn’t speak, and when the microwave went off he grabbed his dinner and a fork, maneuvering around Charlie in order to head towards his room. His father grunted a good night, the others waving lazily towards him, and the last thing he saw was Charlie standing between the living room and the kitchen, watching him with a knowing smile.

He locked the door behind him when he stepped into his room, and he turned on the light. He tried to avoid the signs of a fight as he sat down on his bed, but his gaze kept floating back, caught in the trap of seeing his own vulnerability splayed out so potently. The desk was askew, the chair was knocked on its side, and there were the unmistakable signs of fingernail scratches on the floorboards. He could almost see Garrett Jacob Hobbs hauling him back from the window, the precise place that he was thrown to the floor, and as he chewed a questionable mouthful of carrots, he saw his eyes bulge, his hands flail, and his mouth gape. No one came for him. No one knew of his strife. When he went slack, he was carried bridal style, a sacrificial lamb to the slaughter.

At least this time, the lamb survived.

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Miss Avery lay impaled on the stag head, her arms spread out by her sides. I stare, but it doesn’t quite connect, doesn’t quite reach me that someone got to her before I could. I cross the distance between us, and I’m acutely aware of the fungi that grows before me, a connection that transcends speech. They make the path, and I stare down at her when I reach her, aggrieved.

“Who did this to you?” I ask, but she can’t answer. Her mouth is open in a scream that will never be heard, and her chest cavity is gapes wide, displaying herself to me. I reach in, and my fingertips caress the heart that was left. I have the heart. I have the heart.

“They didn’t honor you,” I tell her, and I weep. I take the heart and I hold it, shaking with the indignation of her death, how she was not honored or loved. My breath is fire, and I

let out a furious scream.

"They didn't honor you!" I roar, and I press the heart to my chest, willing it to beat. It doesn't, and I am unseen in my pain. I'm unseen in my agony. There is the sound of another living being breathing, and I look up to see the stag before me, poised over Miss Avery's head. It's not Miss Avery, though; when I look down, it's Abigail, and she reaches for her heart, blood pooling and running from her lips as she screams and screams and screams.

Will woke to the sound of barking. There was a moment of innate instinct –from one breath to the next –that told him that that wasn't normal. Another inhale told him that the air was too cold, the light too bright. He exhaled, and his arms prickled from the early morning breeze, urging him to put on a coat. He opened his eyes and stared into the sun.

He gave a start as he realized he was standing in a field.

"This isn't real," he said, and he closed his eyes tightly. His bare feet sunk into the soil though, and no matter how long he stood with his eyes closed and his breathing becoming erratic, he didn't magically appear back in his room. He opened his eyes and looked about frantically, hands clenched into fists at his sides.

Just behind him sat the dog from the road.

He didn't look hostile or afraid; at Will's stunned, stiff movement, he tilted his head and whined at him, concerned. In the distance, he could see his house wasn't too far away, and he let out a raspy breath, rubbing his stiff throat. As he stiffly walked towards the house, he heard the soft padding of paws and knew that the dog was following.

"I don't have dog food," he told the dog. The dog wasn't deterred. When he reached the house, the dog followed him in, and Will was at a loss as he hopped up onto the bed in the front room and made himself at home, laying down despite muddy paws and dirty fur.

"You need a bath if you're going to stay here," he said, and he cautiously walked over and held his hand out to the dog. The dog whined, then sniffed his hand and licked it. With a small, barely-there smile Will said down on the edge of the bed, and the dog inched closer, allowing him to pet his head.

Once he could pet him, bathing was easy. He was dubbed Winston, a cross between what seemed to be a lab and a golden retriever, and once he was dry he stretched out on Will's bed, completely and utterly content. Watching him, Will could almost forget about the *how* of him being able to find him. Thinking on it though led to worse thoughts, thoughts about how he'd gotten in that field and how long he'd been standing there before he'd woken up. Where else had he gone? Where else was he going to go? Not knowing somehow made it worse.

Chapter End Notes

I've had a few people tell me that they were referred to this fanfic by a friend, and you guys have no idea what that means! :) Thanks for commenting, sharing, and just generally enjoying this story with me.

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 15:

He went to the front office at school later that morning in order to explain himself. When he got there, he didn't have to bother.

"There's a whole investigation going on," Principal Beezle said, hauling him into his office. "We were told that you were part of things, and you know what? We just want to support you. We want to support you, Abigail Hobbs, and anyone else involved. I want you to know that you have our utmost sympathies, and anything that we as a school can do to make you feel that is yours. We want this to be a safe space, and if you need it, we have counselors that can help."

"I…just need some time," Will said slowly. "I'm worried about Abigail, and I don't think that I can focus right now."

"Take the week," Principal Beezle said firmly. "Take next week if you need to. Take as much time as you can, and you just don't worry about it, okay?"

"I think I just need until Abigail wakes up, and I'll be okay," Will replied. Principal Beezle looked about two seconds away from hugging him; Will self-consciously adjusted the turtle neck to make sure it didn't shift and reveal anything.

The front desk woman didn't appear to have as much Lion Pride as usual. She had the deflated, dashed expression of a woman who'd been given too much bad news in too short of a time. When she made eye contact with Will, she sniffled and blew into a tissue. He looked away, and when she could compose herself, she handed him a slip of paper for his excused absences.

Outside of the door, Will looked over at the crowds of students beginning to head towards class; it wasn't lost on him that many of them stared, and some even pointed. Their whispers were hisses, piercing and prodding, and he made for the exit, head ducked. He wasn't ready for the questions of the accusing. Not again. Not now, not ever, and his hands became clammy at the thought.

"Hey, lumberjack," Beverly said, and he had to stop from colliding into her as she appeared right in front of him. He stared for a long moment, waiting, but her expression didn't shift to pity or accusation. She tilted her head and considered him, turning and opening the door for him.

"Thanks," he muttered, walking through it. She followed, her combat boots scuffing and scraping along the ground.

“I got your classwork for you, but I don’t have your address,” she said conversationally.

“Thanks,” he repeated, zipping his jacket up. Late October had the taste of the bitter cold that was to come; he’d have to save up for a good coat.

“Are you okay?” Beverly asked as they headed towards his car. He laughed, a short, barking noise.

“Do I seem different to you?” he asked.

“Well, since day one you’ve seemed different. I guess that makes it so that no one can ever tell when something’s truly wrong?” She shifted and adjusted her backpack on her back.

“You don’t know much about me to really know, I guess,” Will said quietly.

“I know enough. I know you left Georgia with some red on your hands, and now you’ve found it here, too.” Beverly paused at the front of his truck and frowned impressively.

“So you heard?”

“Everyone heard, Will. It’s in the papers, and Tattlecrime got it first.” Beverly shifted uncomfortably, zipping her jacket up, too.

“Tattlecrime,” Will spat, hovering by his driver door. He stopped, though, and looked at her warily. “What did she say?”

“I don’t think you want to see,” Beverly said cautiously.

“I think I do,” he replied. She bit her lip, considering him, then sighed and grabbed her smart phone, opening up the internet to search. After a few quick, decisive taps of the screen, she handed it over to him across the hood.

Inside the Shrike’s Nest! Plus exclusive crime scene photos, and the buzz of the would-be killer, Will Graham

“The would-be killer?” Will asked, disgust roiling through him.

“You don’t have to read it, you know. Once Freddie Lounds gets her teeth in something, she’s like a rabid dog,” Beverly said.

“Once again, readers, I found Will Graham at the crime scene of a gristly murder. We last left him in Georgia in the aftermath of his dear friend’s murder-suicide, and it seems that he’s moved on to bigger waters. We’re not quite sure as to why he was found at the Shrike’s nest, holding onto Abigail Hobbs for dear life, but we do know that he was the one to pull the trigger on the Shrike, sending him to his grave before he could be taken to justice. You would

think that he would be taken into police custody, but he was let go before reason could set in."

"Will," Beverly objected.

"Not two days later took him to the active crime scene of another murder that the FBI is investigating. The FBI agent questioned wasn't quite sure what he was doing there, but all they could be aware of was that whatever he said set Jack Crawford on a war path *away* from Garrett Jacob Hobbs. Just who is this young, fresh-faced teen with the power to sway the Federal Bureau of Investigation? What credentials does he have that they give him an active ear? It is said that he can get into the minds of killers –if that is true, such a person should be kept as far away from any killer as possible, not led directly to them."

Will's grip on the phone tightened at the image of him standing beside Jack Crawford in the field. He looked just as sallow, just as haggard as he had in the last photo, only this time there were faint signs of bruising around his neck. He let out a sharp laugh and looked up at the sky, questioning. When the heavens didn't open with an answer, he turned and savagely handed the phone back, shaking.

"There has to be something in there that's libel," Beverly said. Will wiped his mouth to remove the curses that sat just on the tip of his tongue. "Not everyone believes her, Will."

"Not everyone," he spat, and he shook his head. "But enough of them. Enough that that's why the principal is so eager to have me away from the school."

"Just until it dies down," Beverly reminded him. "Besides, out of all the jerkwads in there, I think he'd be one of the few to actually care what happened to you."

"Do you think there's something wrong with me?" Will asked, staring at her. Beverly quirked an eyebrow and tucked her phone into her pocket, thinking.

"Like you said, I don't know you enough. But…from what I do know of you, you're no killer or instigator of killing. You're weird, but that's another level entirely."

"I should go. No one should see you talking with a killer," Will said savagely. He opened the door to the truck and climbed in, muscles twitching with the need to run. The last time he'd run, though, he'd found dead bodies. It seemed no matter what he did, he'd be stuck perpetually finding more and more bodies. Beverly climbed into the passenger side and sat there, yanking the door closed behind her.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"You're not going anywhere," he said.

"Look, I'm not going to leave you with Freddie Lounds in your head for the rest of the day. Headed home? I'll help with homework." He wanted to shout, to throw her out. He wanted to protest that that was Abigail's place and not hers, no way could it *possibly* be hers. When he looked at the expression on her face, though, he paused. Her eyes were set,

narrowed in a stubborn determination, and her chin was lifted stubbornly. He saw a thousand things on her face, but none of them was retreat.

"I'm going to town," he said, looking away. "I need dog food."

Dog food, a couple of dog bowls, a leash, collar, and dog bed later took them towards Hannibal's park. Beverly didn't protest the direction that they headed, and she took her boots off in order to walk around the grass barefoot.

"I've got violin lessons around here," she said conversationally. Behind her, Garrett Jacob Hobbs and Jared Freeman tossed a Frisbee. He stared at them, equal parts disgusted and longing, and he rubbed his head. The headaches were coming so frequently that he could almost time their arrival, like clockwork.

"When's that?" he asked.

"Four-thirty, so I've got time," she said.

"I've got an appointment at four-thirty, too," he replied. His fingers fiddled with the broken keychain on her keys, trying to fix it as she walked about.

"For music?"

"For psychoanalysis," he corrected, and she laughed. It was the sort of laugh that relished in the uncomfortable rather than mask it.

"I say, we stay here all day until it's time, then you come and get me afterwards," she declared, and Will nodded after a moment of thought. That could work. That could certainly work.

"I don't think I'm supposed to condone you skipping school," he said after a moment.

"You didn't really have a choice," Beverly retorted, and she laughed again, tossing her shoes down beside her bag. When she went to walk by him, she stopped and squinted, studying him. "Did you know that your glasses are crooked?"

He didn't know, but he fixed them anyway. Past her shoulder, Garrett Jacob Hobbs paused and stared, chest jerking spastically as random spots of red appeared on his shirt, sending him flying onto his back as he bled out. Jared Freeman took the Frisbee and placed it in his mouth, pulling the trigger. He dropped with him, and Will shook his head roughly, dispelling the image.

He dropped her off at Chordophone String Shop, although she cajoled him into going inside with her.

"He uses cat gut strings, and I'm a little proud at being his student. He mostly works with cellists, but if you're good enough, he'll give lessons on violin," she said, walking up the steps. From within her bag, she produced her violin case, and Will marveled at what else she had hidden inside of her backpack.

“I thought you were no Lindsey Stirling,” Will said.

“I’m no Lindsey Stirling, but he said I’m good enough to be in an orchestra someday. My parents were emphatic that I go to him since the last kid got a one-way ticket to a –well, you wouldn’t know it, but a really fancy orchestra up in New York.” She opened the door to the small, modest shop, and instantly the scent of wood and wood polish assaulted him. Will covered his nose until he could get used to the smell, then followed her past rows upon rows of gorgeous, richly treated violins and cellos where a tall, lanky man stood waiting behind a counter.

“Beverly,” he greeted warmly.

“Mr. Budge, this is my friend Will.” She smiled at him and headed into a small parlor of sorts where a piano sat next to a chair and music stand. Mr. Budge looked at Will, and Will studied the faded but lovely rug in front of his counter.

“Are you a musician, Will?” he asked.

“I’m not that talented,” he said. Beverly came back without her things, and she placed her hands on her hips.

“Oh, I’m sure you are. Perhaps you just need to find your niche,” Mr. Budge said, and he walked around the counter, hands placed elegantly before him.

“I’ve seen his hands, and he could be a piano player,” Beverly said. Will cast her a confused glance, but she didn’t rescind her statement.

“The piano is an elegant piece. I have a weakness for things that require strings,” he said, and his gaze carried over to the violins along the walls.

“Do you make them all by hand?” Will asked, looking up. There was a quality of something mystical in the air, each violin suspended as its own universe, its own special sound and voice. He wanted to reach up and touch one, but he held himself back.

“Only some, and I’m a novice at that,” Mr. Budge protested with a quiet laugh. “If you ever have the yearning to learn though, my doors are open. If Beverly recommends you, then I’m willing to trust the potential talent.” He held his hand out, and Will almost forgot to shake it, lost as he was among the elegantly carved wood. He promised Beverly he’d be back after his appointment, then left her to her work, the echoes of a fine-tuned warmup carrying after him as the door closed.

He was walking to his truck, but at the sound of a shout he paused, turning his head. Standing in the middle of traffic, wearing nothing but her hospital dress, Abigail stared at him, hand to her throat. Her feet were bare, stained from the dirty streets she’d walked across, and between her fingers blood wept from the wound.

“That’s not real,” he said, but when he pinched himself she didn’t go away. She stood as cars swerved about her, and when their eyes met, tears began to fall.

“You killed him,” she said, and she choked on a breath. Will shook his head, feet at the edge of the curb, and he pinched himself again.

“You’re not real,” he said insistently, and she let go of her neck to wipe tears off of her cheeks, smearing blood along her jawline.

“He was my father and you killed him!” she said, and she hovered, a breath away from falling before the wheels of a car. He blanched, and when she went to step into traffic, he ran out, arms reaching, breath hitching, and –

-A car horn blared insistently, jolting him. Will turned and stared at the car that sat not two inches from him, then to Abigail who wasn’t there anymore. He bit his lip roughly, confused, but when the horn honked again, he gave a jump and made his way back to the sidewalk, fumbling for his truck keys. There was no blood on the street. There was no Abigail, no cries of the accused. He all but fled to his truck and fired it up, jumping into traffic and heading towards Hannibal’s, hell licking at his heels.

He didn’t bother knocking when he reached his house. He burst in and combed through the rooms until he found Hannibal in the kitchen, pouring water into the carafe he normally had in his office.

“Will, come in,” Hannibal said dryly once his surprise faded, gesturing about the kitchen. His brow furrowed at the hasty entry, and he set the water purifier on the counter.

“I’m sorry, I’m *sorry*, I just…I just need…” Will paced, and his breath came short. He pressed his hand to his heart that jerked about irregularly, and he let out a wheezing laugh. “Hannibal, I think I’m losing it.”

“What happened?” Hannibal asked, skirting the island.

“I…I almost died,” he said, and he rocked back on his heels, grabbing his glasses and ripping them off of his face. “I literally saw Abigail Hobbs standing in traffic, and I ran out to get her and almost got hit by a car!”

“…By your reaction, I can conclude that Abigail Hobbs was not standing in traffic,” Hannibal said slowly.

“She wasn’t! And, and this morning I woke up in a field with no recollection of ever having been there, or how I got there, but somehow I got there because that’s where I woke up!”

“You were sleepwalking?” Hannibal asked.

“Apparently!” He pinched the bridge of his nose roughly, and he let out a panicked, hysterical laugh. “I’m losing my mind…I thought being on the spectrum was going to be the worst of my life with the way my dad and everyone…how they acted, but this…I’m not even myself anymore, am I? Am I even a person?”

“Of course you are,” Hannibal said. “Let’s go and take a seat and discuss this, shall we?” His calm in the face of Will’s hysteria was an anchor, and after he cleaned up the kitchen, Will followed him up the stairs to his office, sinking down into the leather that’d become somewhat familiar to him. He took the cup of water and took a long drink of it, rubbing the aching spot between his brows.

“Now, you’re sleepwalking? And you’re having delusions?”

“I’d say hallucinations,” Will said quietly, miserably. “I *saw* her. I *saw* Garrett Jacob Hobbs and Jared Freeman playing Frisbee in the park. I…I’m seeing things.”

“You’ve endured incredibly traumatic events, Will. You have to allow yourself to grieve.”

“I’m trying to, but I can’t when I…I don’t know how to grieve. I’m just afraid, and my reality is going to get me killed if I just…” He pressed his hand over his eyes, and he withheld a whine that crawled up his throat. “Jack Crawford had me look at another crime scene, and I can’t get the image of her body out of my head.”

“Why would he ask you to look at a crime scene?” Hannibal asked, surprised.

“He spoke with you about me, and he thought I could confirm whether or not another body that was missing pieces was…was Hobbs’.”

“Did he have another victim that night?” Hannibal said, and the leather squeaked as he shifted in his chair.

“No, this was…this was different.” Will looked up at the ceiling, focusing on getting his breath back. “This was someone copying him, but it wasn’t the same. They mutilated her, humiliated her, and it was like…they had to show me the negative so that I could see the positive in Garrett Jacob Hobbs. Their cruelty, their…disdain for her showed me that he loved those other girls. They were his daughter, and she’s my daughter, but she’s *not*.”

“Who are you in this moment?” Hannibal asked gently.

“I’m Will Graham, but I don’t feel like Will Graham,” he groaned, and he tightened his grip on the glass. “I don’t know what that means anymore.”

“You’re in a dark place right now, Will,” Hannibal said, and he sat forward. Will looked across the way at him, and he nodded in agreement, forcing himself to sit up as well. “What are the thoughts that make you assume you are but are not Will Graham?”

“I saw myself standing above those antlers in the field, and it was like someone had thrown Miss Avery onto them. I was angry, furious, but suddenly it wasn’t her, it was Abigail, and I’d thrown her onto the horns. I’d butchered her, murdered her, and when I woke up, it felt…good. It felt good to hurt someone.”

“You didn’t hurt her, though,” Hannibal pointed out. “You hurt her attacker, and in doing so protected her.”

“If I keep seeing these things, though, what if one day I hurt her by accident? What if I lose control of myself?”

“And that brings us to the root of your fears. It is not the fear that you enjoyed killing him, it’s the fear that you enjoyed it so much that you’ll harm someone that is not so wicked,” Hannibal said, and Will could only gape, eyes fastened on him.

“It…wasn’t…”

“If you look at it like that though, you’ll see that it can’t happen. You only enjoyed killing him because he was so terrible of a person. Therefore, killing anyone less terrible wouldn’t make you happy. You haven’t lost yourself, Will Graham, you merely learned something new.”

He nodded, then winced as the pain lanced through his eye. He rubbed it, eyes watering. “Do you have an aspirin?”

“You have another headache?” Hannibal asked, standing up.

“I always have headaches,” Will muttered. Hannibal walked out of the room and returned a few moments later with a couple of pills, handing them over. Will took them and popped them into his mouth, swallowing them down with a sip of water.

“How often are your headaches?” Hannibal asked.

“Almost daily…I think I’m just stressed.” He laughed, shaking his head. “I *know* I’m stressed.”

“Stress induced headaches are normal for someone in your position, but you should see a doctor if it continues.”

“What else could it be?” Will asked.

“Headaches can be a symptom of many things, so it’s difficult to tell. There are even some instances of headaches not being a true physical pain, but a sign of mental illness where your brain tricks itself into thinking that is has a headache.”

“Well if we take a look at the drawing board, it’s likely the last one, then,” he said miserably. He rubbed his face, and he sighed, standing up to pace the room.

“When you imagine yourself as Garrett Jacob Hobbs, what is it like? You do not feel bloodthirsty or needing every time, do you? When you first connected with him in the cabin, did you see his actions first, or merely his motives?”

“I saw his reasons, first,” Will said, back turned to him. Speaking was far easier when you didn’t have to look.

“How well did it sound out to you?” Hannibal asked.

“With…noise and clarity,” he said, peering up at the ceiling. He took another sip of water. “And I feel…like we are doing the same things at different locations in our day. I’m brushing my teeth, and he’s…”

“Dead,” Hannibal finished for him.

“It doesn’t really feel like it, though,” Will murmured. He slid his fingers along his neck, where the knife had chewed through Abigail’s skin. “He exists because I exist.”

“And Jared Freeman exists because you exist as well?” At Will’s curt nod, Hannibal shifted in his chair. “Even in that short time, you blended so quickly with him that you feel he’s entrenched as far as your late friend?”

“The panic, I think, made it so. I saw the photos of the girls from Jack when I went to the HQ to file the report. I looked at their…faces beneath the pixels, beneath the plastic and paper blend printed with such a high gloss that the light cut blinding highlights at the edges… I knew them. I could see myself killing each one, and I thought about Abigail and I knew why. It felt…honorable.”

“You don’t feel it as honorable now, though. That tells me you haven’t placed yourself completely in the body of Hobbs.”

“I know who I am…” Will said, turning to sit down. He balanced at the edge of the chair, gritting his teeth. “I’m Will Graham.”

“In your darkest moments though, you are Garrett Jacob Hobbs, and you had very good reason to kill those girls.”

His grip on the glass tightened, and it shattered, raining glass and water everywhere. He let out a soft gasp of surprise, then pain. Once he realized what he’d done, Will slipped from the chair and knelt down by the rug, cursing his stupidity as he picked up the pieces. The shards dipped and sunk into the rug, and when he cut his finger on one, he winced. It was one thing to suppose he was stressed and had headaches to combat the stress. It was another to think that he was so mentally ruined that his mind was *tricking* him.

“I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to…” his hands shook so badly that he dropped the pieces, and he gritted his teeth.

“It’s quite alright, Will. Accidents happen,” Hannibal said, and he knelt beside him to help pick up the pieces. “You’ll cut yourself if you’re not careful.”

He brushed Will’s hands away and used a handkerchief to clean up, far calmer than Will was. That close, Will could smell a light, expensive aftershave, something that faintly reminded him of the forest and the feeling of being clean. He could see the clean line of his jaw, the ruggedness of his five o’clock shadow. He held his breath, and Hannibal gathered up what he could, going to the waste bin and throwing it away once he was done. When he disappeared from the room, Will stood and stuck his finger in his mouth to stop the flow of blood.

Hannibal returned with a towel, and he laid it over the water spot. He led Will to the window where the light adequately let him see the wound, and he dabbed at it with an alcohol swab before administering a band-aid.

"And as much as licking the wound helps animals, I find a band-aid more practical," he said lightly. It took Will a second to realize that he was teasing, and he laughed bleakly, staring down at his finger.

"I'll replace the glass," he said. It breaking had shattered the frenzy that gripped him. Standing in the sunlight, he didn't feel quite so imbalanced.

"Don't," Hannibal said, grabbing his shoulder to squeeze it. "One glass versus your mental stability is no contest. It was an accident."

He let go of him, but as he turned to move away, his head dipped, and he inhaled deeply. Will blinked, surprised, and Hannibal walked over to the trash bin and threw the bits of band-aid wrapper away.

"Did you just…smell me?" he asked Hannibal's back. Hannibal wiped his hands on a new handkerchief and nodded casually, like that was an everyday sort of question in the everyday life of a Lecter. Will noted that he didn't turn back to make eye contact, though.

"It's difficult not to. I have an excellent nose, and I believe you're wearing your father's aftershave."

"It's…the only aftershave in the house," Will said. Somehow, the admission was like revealing a secret, and a sordid one at that. He felt his cheeks warm.

"It makes me think of bottles with ships on the front," Hannibal said. "Something you'd find at a drug store that doesn't suit you, but you choose ultimately because it's cheap." Will opened his mouth to protest, but he stopped; Hannibal wasn't wrong.

"It just…seemed a waste to get another," Will said after a beat. "I didn't have to pay for this one."

"How do you feel about hypnosis, Will?" Will snorted, not objecting to the change of subject. His skin felt irritated, an itch he couldn't quite reach.

"On what grounds?" he asked.

"Through hypnosis, perhaps I can better aid you in not sleepwalking. Sometimes it has been proven effective, and if you're willing to try, then I am. Your fear is not being able to have knowledge or control over what you do. I aim to help with that."

"You're not going to hypnotize me into hating the use of this aftershave, are you?" Will asked. Hannibal smiled and dipped his head, finishing his glass of water.

"Only if you ask me to."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for your support, guys! I'm having a blast, and with a surprise elopement things are going swell. He had to go back to the house on the coast because work, but I will be moving at the end of the month to join him there, so there may be a slight delay in updates around Memorial Day weekend while I move.

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 16:

His dad didn't like the idea of a dog.

"They bark, they piss where they're not supposed to, and they get hair everywhere," he said, heading towards the fridge. "And I don't want to pay for his dog food."

"I already bought dog food," Will said, rubbing Winston's flank. He was a mild-mannered dog, and even at the side-eyed stare Bill Graham gave, he wasn't deterred. He nosed Will's cheek, and his tail wagged.

"I'm not going to exercise him," his dad said.

"You don't have to. You won't be here for him anyway, I will."

"What's that supposed to mean?" his father asked. Will shrugged, rubbing his ear to relieve tension.

"You work a lot, and I don't have after school activities. He has nowhere to go," he said, and he looked at his father with a bleak, needy expression. "Didn't Dr. Du Maurier say I needed something like therapy? This dog was free, and he'll cost you nothing. Animals are great for therapy."

"Are you twisting my words on me?" Bill asked suspiciously.

"No," Will said, and it was a good lie. Bill eyed Winston like he was a chewed-up slipper just waiting to happen, and he let out a loud, sullen sigh.

"First time he pisses in the house, he's gone," he said, and Will grinned. It was the first good win in a long time.

The second win was getting a call on Friday saying that Abigail had woken up at the psychiatric hospital. He took Winston out for a morning run around the place, then jumped into the truck and headed in her direction. His pulse hummed in his fingertips, and he drummed them on the steering wheel, toe pushing the accelerator without his realizing it.

Once there, he was surprised to see Hannibal getting out of his car as well, well-groomed and wrapped in a light wool coat. He waved and crossed the parking lot, gaze up towards the cloudy day.

"You got a call as well?" Will asked.

“They said they already called you, so I thought that I’d wait,” Hannibal replied, walking into the building. Will suppressed a shudder, looking up at it. Although cheery, the outer structure belied the horrors his mind conjured about such a place. Nightmares for the longest time haunted him that one day he’d go into one that he wouldn’t be allowed out of. Hopefully, with Hannibal beside him, they wouldn’t think to question it.

Unlike the hospital, with its chemical smell and starched nurses, the psychiatric hospital had an air of pain hidden by floral print pillows and still life paintings of fruit. The doors behind them closed, and Will’s throat tightened as a thread of nervous energy coiled in his gut. As they signed in, a nurse with an appropriately stern posture led them down the hall towards the wing for injury treatment and ‘suicide risks’.

“Abigail isn’t a suicide risk,” Will muttered under his breath.

“We don’t know the state of mind she’s going to be in, and they’ve had her awake for at least two or three hours,” Hannibal reminded him. Will wanted to argue, but the wallpaper in its ugly shade of pink distracted him, then the sound of voices inside the room distracted him even more.

“If they don’t fit, just keep the tags on them and I’ll return them,” Alana was saying as they opened the door. “I just thought it’d be easier for you to have something.”

“Thank you,” Abigail said, voice near-indiscernible. At the sound of the door she looked up, and when she tried to make eye contact with Will, he had to look away; he didn’t want to see.

“Alana Bloom, what a surprise,” Hannibal said, and Will nodded in agreement, feet treacherously moving him closer to the foot of the bed without his permission. Alana stood up, legs crowded with bags from various clothing stores, and she smiled.

“I’m just visiting with Abigail,” she said, like they deserved an explanation.

“That is kind of you to do; I wasn’t aware that you were acquainted,” Hannibal said, and Will felt him step up to his side, a sturdy presence. His gaze was fixed on the cotton blankets across her legs, a putrid green that looked close to vomit. The air smelled of medicine and unwashed hair, a faint undertone of something woodsy, earthy. He wondered if Abigail had carried the forest back with her when she’d been rescued, or if there was an aerosol spray one could use to recreate the stench of that dark, bleak night.

“We’ve met once, but some of us at the university thought that we could donate money and get her a few nice things,” Alana said.

“Apparently I’m a celebrity,” Abigail informed them, a serrated edge to her voice. “I’m all anyone can talk about.”

“It was a traumatic event, and the media likes to spin such things in their favor,” Hannibal said.

“You’re Hannibal, aren’t you? Will’s friend?” Will grimaced at her voice, how it was utterly, utterly wrong. It wasn’t Abigail, eyes pleading for understanding, but a different person, a different face. He wanted to look up, to see what’d become of her, but he couldn’t bring himself to lift his head. What if he saw the girl that’d first held the hunting knife?

What if he saw her father instead?

“I am. You’re rather perceptive,” Hannibal complimented her.

“Not perceptive enough,” she replied, and it echoed back to the time Hannibal had sat across from Will in the school hallway. Jared Freeman had just murdered their teacher, and Will hadn’t known him well enough. She lived with him, loved him as her father, but not enough. Will thought that by the end of it all, he’d drown on never having enough. If Hannibal heard the same pull, the same echo, he gave no indication. Will glanced to him and caught his eye, and he swallowed heavily and looked away.

“I was the person that Will called that night,” Hannibal explained when no one spoke. There was a collective breath being held in the room, one fragile enough to pop from the prick of a needle.

“I assumed it wasn’t the police. He dialed more than three numbers,” Abigail replied.

“How could you tell?” Will asked, and his voice came out wrong. It was aggressive; it was accusatory. He stared down at the stain on the blanket as though looks alone could purify it, and he reached up to rub the side of his neck. Another turtleneck layered underneath a plaid shirt hid the worst of the damage.

“I knew what to look for,” Abigail replied after a moment, clipped. The silence hung once more, heavy and intoxicating, and Alana cleared her throat to try and dispel it.

“I need to make a call,” she said lightly. “Abigail, I hope the clothes work out for you. Hannibal, I wanted to ask you something, actually, outside?”

“Oh, yes, of course,” Hannibal said, falling in line with her plan. Will glanced over to him again, but he was already walking out of the room, head turned towards Alana intently as she closed the door behind them. It clicked, a sharp and pronounced sound in the silence.

Will spied a sturdy chair near the bed and sat down, rubbing his face to wipe away the dips and furrows of his frown. He felt Abigail’s stare burning on top of his head, but he chose to ignore it. He listened instead to the steady, rhythmic chirping of her heart monitor.

“Are you going to look at me?” Abigail asked when Will didn’t speak. “Or…are you just going to stare at that ugly stain on the blanket?”

“That stain is very ingrained in the threads,” Will said after a moment. “They dried it, and it set the stain.”

“Will,”

“I’m afraid to look at you,” he continued, talking over her. “I’m afraid of what I’ll see.” His gaze dropped to the floor, and he shook his head, unable to form the words to convey how hornets stirred in his chest.

“D-do…do you think I’m like him?” she asked, and the stark, straightforward tone she’d used on Alana and Hannibal dropped.

“You were a fisherman,” Will said. “But you didn’t want to be, at least; that’s what I’m telling myself. You didn’t want to be the bait.”

“And you murdered my father,” she bit out.

“You or him, Abigail, and I chose you,” Will snapped. “You let him see us and assume too much. You couldn’t kill him, so you put me in the position to kill him for you.”

She said nothing, and in the quiet coated with blood, he looked up at her. Tears trailed down her cheeks, and she clenched her blankets, vainly trying to rend them in two.

“Do you hate me?” she asked, and her voice broke. “You…y-you must hate me.”

“No,” Will said hoarsely. “I love you.”

She looked up at him, and when their eyes met, she saw. She saw his love, and what that sort of love really was, the only thing it could ever be. It was not pure. It was not romantic. It was desperate, needing. It was the love of Garrett Jacob Hobbs, and because of her it hadn’t died with him. It’d merely moved to a new host, something to devour and eat away at the bits of him that were left. Will saw the moment that what little façade she’d held up crumbled away; like waves against the breakers when the breakers couldn’t hold anymore.

“I’m sorry,” she said, and she buried her face in her hands to muffle her cries. “I’m sorry I did this to you…I didn’t…I didn’t want this.”

“You did what you thought was necessary to survive,” Will said. “I don’t hate you for that.”

“I used you.”

“Does that make you feel responsible for me?” he asked, a snarl on his lips.

“I knew you’d endured this kind of thing before, and I used your past against you,” she said, and fingers dragged through her hair to grip it unmercifully.

“But does that make you feel responsible for me?” he repeated.

“Yes,” she hissed into the cotton blanket. “Don’t you?”

“Yes,” he agreed. “I suppose that means we’ll have to be responsible for each other.”

“I’m sorry,” she repeated, and she lifted her head to look at him. Her eyes were red-rimmed, as though he’d dipped a brush in blood and drew a fine line.

"Are you really?" he asked.

"It wasn't supposed to be like this," she said, and he couldn't help but sneer.

"Oh, come on, Abigail…you got what you wanted. Don't back down now," he chided, and she flinched. "They said you're on a potential suicide watch…but I don't think that's true."

"It's because I'm not talking to them," she replied. "They think I'm going to do something irrational."

"No, I think you're fairly rational. I think you're equally good at manipulating them, too."

"What do you mean?" she asked, and he heard the dread in her voice.

"If you're on suicide watch, no one is likely to think you had any hand in your dad's murders," he said pleasantly.

She said nothing more, her expression bleak as she seemed to truly see him for the first time. She wiped her face and ducked her head, her hair falling forward to hide the thick patch of gauze at her neck. When she didn't speak, he stood and walked to the door, opening it. Alana and Hannibal were speaking quietly, although they stopped and turned towards the sound of him clearing his throat.

"We're ready for more people," he announced, walking back into the room. After a beat, they followed.

It was something of an interrogation, Abigail's tears gone now that someone other than Will could see. He didn't see Garrett Jacob Hobbs in the edges of her eyes, but as he looked on, he saw a cunning tilt to her lips and a manipulative curl to her eyelashes. She was a different sort of predator, one that watched and knew precisely what to say and when to say it. She sat with poise, receiving the state of the union without having to even get out of bed.

"What's going to happen to the house?"

"The families grieving will likely get whatever money is gained from selling it. It's a payoff for wrongful deaths," Alana said. "Nothing's been decided of course, but that's generally what happens."

"Then what's going to happen to me?" Abigail whispered.

"First, you're going to focus on your recovery. Your school was contacted, and they're willing to put things on hold for you because they understand that your mental recovery is key," Alana replied.

"I was on track to graduate early," Abigail protested, shaking her head.

"That may not be feasible, given the circumstances," said Hannibal gently. Silence. The unspoken reality that she probably couldn't go home anymore. There was no home to go

to. Abigail stared at the blanket, anger and despair rippling along her skin with short, electric bursts.

"Do you remember what caused your father to react so poorly?" Hannibal asked when she didn't speak.

"He was upset about Will," Abigail said reluctantly. "Then he got a phone call, and someone asked for him. When he got off of the phone, he started acting weird."

"Weird?" Alana pressed.

"He left the kitchen, and when he came back he grabbed my mom, and he…he changed. He was loving, up until the part when he wasn't anymore." She swallowed heavily, hand reaching up to her neck before she stopped herself.

"He received a phone call?" Hannibal asked. "Did you recognize the caller?"

"I'd never heard that voice before that day," she said, slowly looking over to him.

"Was it a friend? An accomplice?" Alana wondered out loud.

"Whatever he was, whatever he said…it set my dad off. He forced me into the car after he left my mom in the kitchen, and he went to Will's house." She said the words, but each one pulled out a thread of what little control she had over her voice. She clenched her jaw and looked down at her blanket, shoulders curling in on herself.

"You were very brave," Alana said warmly. "You both were," she added, glancing to Will.

"Will was braver," said Abigail. "I just ran…he fought."

"It takes courage to run from a predator that you knew would chase," Will replied.

"Especially when the person you're running from is your father," Hannibal added.

"Is it selfish to be grateful that you were there?" Abigail asked, looking up at Will. "Is that selfish of me?"

"No," Will said hoarsely, and the word was a hot poker down his throat. He took a step away from her, faltering. "Excuse me…I have to go." He headed towards the door, not looking at Alana or Hannibal.

"Will you come back again?" Abigail asked, sitting up farther in her bed. He grabbed the door handle and paused, rubbing his throat.

"Yes," he decided after a moment. He all but fled the room, past the bustling orderly with a tray of food, past a girl standing in the hall looking utterly lost, and almost past the reception area where a stern woman called to him to sign out. He grabbed the pen and scribbled his name on the line, ducking his head under her scrutiny. When he walked through

the exit doors, he had the sensation of liberty, of being behind bars and suddenly being set free.

Outside, he nearly collided on the sidewalk with a gingery boy whose chin was tucked, prepared to charge. Will skirted around him, but paused when he saw a very familiar person following the fury that carved a path towards the entrance.

"They won't allow you in there, Nick, be reasonable," Freddie Lounds said, grabbing his arm to haul him back. "You're hurting, and that's understandable, but-"

"That cannibal family ate my sister," he shouted, rounding on her. "You're all pitying her, but-"

"Who are you talking about?" Will asked sharply.

"Butt out of this," Nick snarled. Freddie shot him an apologetic glance, but she did a double-take when she saw who it was.

"Will Graham?" Her hold slackened, and Nick tried to head towards the door. Will took an exaggerated step in front of him.

"Who are you talking about?" he repeated, not at all calm.

"Out of my way," Nick spit out from clenched teeth.

"Not anyone I know, I hope," Will continued, unmoving.

"And if it was?" he growled. "What are you going to do about it?"

"Then you and I will have problems. Several, in fact," he replied. His hands curled to fists. "You should go."

"Are you protecting a cannibal?" Nick scoffed. "You some kind of sick sympathizer?"

"Go," Will encouraged softly, "before my patience runs out."

Nick looked like he very much wanted to argue. When he stared into Will's eyes, though, he seemed to see something that gave him pause. Perhaps it was the shadows of Jared Freeman, covetous and afraid. Perhaps it was Garrett Jacob Hobbs, calm and steady with a knife that carved with ease. Perhaps it was Eldon Stammets, so desperate for connection that he'd bury Nick alive if he wasn't careful. Perhaps it was Will himself, something dark and flitting, something lethal enough that Nick wasn't confidant that he'd win that fight. He let out a slow, manic hiss of breath and turned, climbing into his car to drive away furiously. Will let out a short breath and shook his head, rubbing his temples to release the building pressure.

"Impressive," Freddie said. Will had almost forgotten about her –almost.

"You should leave too," he said unpleasantly.

“Are you going to threaten to hurt me too, Will?” Freddie asked.

“Thinking about it,” he replied.

“Are you angry about what I said in my articles?” she asked, and if she felt threatened she didn’t show it. She wore an unsightly pair of plaid pants with a wide-brimmed sun hat, complete with a sheer burgundy top and striped jacket.

“You’re tasteless. Tactless. Immature, trashy, and your writing is sub-par at best,” Will said, stuffing his hands into his pockets.

“I could rescind what I said about you. If you give me an interview, I can change everything.”

“You’re the one that implied I was a killer,” he snapped.

“You did kill a man,” she replied.

“You implied that before I defended myself.”

“I can fix that,” she said calmly.

“You’re not getting in to see Abigail,” he said, “and you’re certainly not getting an interview with me.” He stared down at her pointed, faux-crocodile print shoes, and he scowled.

“You were asked to consult on a crime scene about a criminal profile. Interesting that they’d give such a serious job to a senior in high school.”

“Go away,” he suggested.

“Is it because maybe you think like them, therefore they wanted your insight? Can you think like a killer, Will?” She took a step closer, peering up at him with wide, intrigued eyes. He was a breath away from her before he knew he’d taken a step as well, her words triggering something furious, something dark. It’d taken a heartbeat, a shift between sound until he towered over her, and he leaned in close so that he could whisper.

“If you really believe that I can think like a killer, maybe you should stop trying to piss me off.”

A camera flash scattered dots of color across his eyes, and he blinked, reaching up to rub them as she pocketed the camera he wasn’t aware she had. A small smirk of victory skirted across her lips, and she turned, heading towards an old hatchback pinto.

“Have a pleasant day, Will Graham,” she called out, climbing into the car. She drove away, and Will had the sinking sensation that he’d found a way to somehow make things even worse.

“Are you okay?” Alana called out behind him, and he whirled around, struggling to compose his face into something like a measure of calm.

“Yes,” he said, and she walked closer, gauging his reaction with a critical expression shown only in her eyes. He looked down to her fashionable pumps rather than witness her see too much.

“That didn’t look like you were okay,” she said, pausing a polite step away.

“I have a habit of sometimes making things worse,” he replied with an unconcerned shrug. “It’s nothing that I can’t handle.”

“If you say so,” Alana said doubtfully.

“I wasn’t going to hurt anyone,” he added, glancing up at her face before looking off towards the cars.

“I didn’t think you would. You don’t have a violent bone in your body.”

“You don’t think so?” he asked.

“I think you have a self-preservation instinct, as we all do,” she replied, folding her arms. “But I don’t see a single part of you that genuinely enjoys hurting other people.”

“Thank you,” Will said sincerely.

“Do you have someone to go home to?” Alana asked. “A family member, a guardian?”

“Are you worried about me being alone?” Will asked, a thread of snark in his voice.

“I think you’ve gone through something that no one should have to endure, and I think the last place anyone should be is alone when that’s happening,” Alana replied, not rising to the bait.

“You could come with me,” Will suggested. Alana laughed, and it wasn’t mocking; it was full-bodied and pure.

“I have a class to get to,” she said, “otherwise, maybe I would.”

She left him with that maybe, and as he drove home he was left with the thought of her sincerely believing in his inability to enjoy hurting people. He had three voices in his head, plus his own that assured him that while the thought was kind and warm, it most certainly wasn’t true.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for all of your continued support in my writing! On an even happier note, I'm about 10 minutes away from fried rice and pot stickers, and I'm just...so excited. SO excited.

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 17:

Charlie was at the house when he got home from work on Saturday, and it seemed he was there to stay. He sat at the table, a bag of groceries beside his microwavable ravioli, and he ate it over a crumbled newspaper article. Winston met him at the door, tail wagging, and he rubbed his ear as he surveyed the intruder.

“Moving in?” Will asked sarcastically, edging around him to open the fridge. There was a couple of six packs of beer, a bottle of wine, a few new odds and ends added to the condiment collection, as well as a pack of steaks, but nothing else.

“Yes,” Charlie replied after he swallowed his food. That gave Will pause; he closed the freezer without grabbing a frozen dinner, turning to look back at Charlie expectantly. Winston shifted beside him and sat down, tail thumping on the floor.

“Why?”

“Your pops owes me money, and he doesn’t have the money. I needed a place to stay, so what I’d pay in rent to move in officially is basically what he owes. I live here for free, that’s how he pays me back.” If this was abnormal to Charlie, it didn’t show. He took another bite of the Chef Boyardee and reached into the bag, taking another can out. “Help yourself," he offered.

“How much does he owe you?” Will asked, a hollow ringing in his ears.

“Nothing big; just a few thousand.”

“A few *thousand*?” Will asked incredulously. “What did he bet?”

“High stakes poker is no joke, Will,” Charlie said, sounding serious for the first time. He looked up from the paper and surveyed him. “You say you’re good for it, you’d better be. He wasn’t, and he’s lucky it was me he lost to, not someone else.”

“I just got a job recently. If you give me time-”

“I’m not taking your money,” Charlie interrupted, waving a hand. “Jesus, I’m no crook. I needed a place to crash, and instead of living at the hotel where they’d bleed me dry, I’m just crashing here. It’d be normally six hundred a month to live here if we were splitting, so he’s just going to let me crash for a few months until what he owes is all used up.”

“That’s…reasonable,” Will said reluctantly. Charlie nudged the ravioli can, and Will grabbed it, accepting the inevitable.

“You know, I try to be reasonable. I work with the man, and you seem like a good kid. I’m not here to step on toes. I won’t go in and out of your room or your business.”

“At least I won’t have to lock the bedroom door,” Will replied, opening the can and shaking the pasta into a bowl. Behind him, Charlie laughed.

“Honestly, all that I want to know is what you’re going to do when your old man sees this.” Charlie thumped the newspaper, and when Will turned around, he knew without having to know exactly what he’d see. A blurred photo of him in a shock blanket, surrounded by FBI officials stared back at him, and a caption underneath read, “Shrike’s Nest Found by High School Friend of Killer’s Daughter”.

“I didn’t know they were calling him the Shrike,” Will said reluctantly. He looked away and tossed the bowl of ravioli into the microwave.

“Shrikes toss their prey on wires and sharp branches and peck the guts out. Those girls were being mounted on antlers and eaten,” Charlie replied informatively. “I thought it was clever.” Winston whined a mild disagreement, and Will scratched his ear lightly.

“Are you going to tell him?” Will asked.

“Don’t you think he’s going to find out?”

“Not if that newspaper is in the trash before he gets home.” As an afterthought, Will looked around. “Where is he?”

“He went fishing,” said Charlie, and he turned the newspaper page. It was headline news, but there were more details on the next page. It was the largest spread of newsprint Will had ever seen. He pointedly turned to watch the microwave.

“He doesn’t have to find out,” Will said after a moment, staring at the bowl turning around and around in the microwave. “Clearly I lived.”

“Is it true that you shot him?” Charlie asked.

“Do you think they embellished?” Will asked.

“Every media outlet does.” Will nodded in agreement and thought of Freddie the day before, her nose turned to the air like a bloodhound.

“Some more than most,” he muttered.

“Did you?” Charlie pressed as he stood up to rinse his bowl, scraping the sauce out with his spoon.

“Does that matter?” Will snapped.

“So you did,” Charlie realized, and he nodded to himself, deep in thought. “Killing people changes a man.”

“Have you ever killed someone?” Will asked darkly.

“No, but I’ve seen what happens to others when they have. They go deep in their own head sometimes, and just because they never intended a first doesn’t mean they won’t go looking for a second.” He scratched his five o’clock shadow and gave Will a side-eyed stare.

“I don’t want a second,” Will said, grabbing the bowl when the microwave dinged. It was hot, and he hissed and let it drop to the counter, shaking his hand to rid it of the tingling burning in his fingers. Winston leapt back from the shifting and moving of feet, tongue lolling.

“We’ll see,” Charlie said with a laugh, grabbing Will’s hand. He tugged him closer and moved his hand under the water. Almost affectionately, he patted Will’s shoulder. “I won’t tell your pops, but I won’t lie for you. Is that fair?”

“I’ve always thought that a lie by omission was better than a direct lie,” Will said when his jaw quit clenching against the pain.

“Is the Shrike the one that did that to your neck?” Charlie asked.

“Yes.”

“It looks pretty nasty,” he noted. Will turned off the faucet and dried off his hands before stirring the sauce up angrily with his neck hunkered.

“It’s fine,” Will replied.

“Fair enough. I knew the truth would come out eventually.” Charlie sat down once more and turned the page of the newspaper, grabbing an apple from the grocery bag. “I think the contents of your kitchen are appalling," he added conversationally. "I got some filler food today but I'm going to put real food in there."

Without thinking, Will laughed, leaning against the counter. From anyone else, it would have sounded like an insult, but from Charlie, it seemed to be more of a statement of fact. Now that he wasn’t going to rat Will out to his father, his presence didn’t seem so threatening. That, and if Winston seemed okay to him, then Will would have to allow it. Dogs were wonderful judges of character, or so he’d been told.

“You don’t like our Hungry Man meals?” he asked.

“You’re too skinny to eat those. You need to bulk up more.” Charlie glanced over at him. “Help yourself to the fruits and veggies, too.”

“Thanks, Charlie,” Will said, and when he headed towards his room, bowl in hand, he snagged an apple from the bag, too. It seemed that he was going to be a far better roommate than his own father.

-

She isn't the same. Her hair holds more waves towards the bottom, and there is a distinct lack of freckling along her cheeks, so much so that her skin is far closer to alabaster than wind-chafed. Her lips are fuller, and her eyes hold more chestnut, but it's the closest that I can see; I've marked her, and she won't get away from me. There are none others on this campus, and she will have to do.

Beside me, the one true being, the entity that holds me enthralled shifts and sighs, looking out of the window. She is the sun, the moon, the stars; she tries to circle from my orbit, and I can't fathom the idea of her leaving me. Where would she go? What would she do? How can she walk away from what we have without a backward glance?

She senses me, and she looks over to smile at me. She is purity in its rarest form, the kind that transcends humanity. I look from her to her replacement, to the one thing that can save her from me, and she understands. She's smart; she's clever. She shifts in her seat and rises, waiting until the girl is distracted before she sits down and engages her in conversation. I love her. She is the light of my life, and I have to save her from me.

It is not a train, though, it is a room of antlers, of prizes and trophies, and with tender care I lift her body and impale it right underneath the collarbone where she will hang, sturdy and unmoving. I do not bring my sunlight with me for this; she can't see the things that I must do in order to keep her safe and alive. Would she turn from me? Would she fear me? Sometimes, in the darkest part of the night I imagine her on these antlers, and I wake in terror of what I've done. I can't lose her. I can't lose her, I can't lose her, I can't lose her, I can't lose her,
I can't…

One day, though, I will. I blink, and it is her on these antlers, eyes wide and glazed in death, and I sob, and I wrap her in my arms. I will honor her. I will consume her. Nothing of her will go to waste.

Otherwise, it's just murder. This is my design.

"Will…Will…." A voice stirred in the far recesses of his mind, and Will groaned, sleep tugging him back into the darkness that lulled and cradled him, suspended above his troubles and fears. There was something wrong, though. Dreams had a habit of leaving one sign or other that not all was what it seemed, and as the shapes shifted and curled about his mind, there was a metallic tang of something that told him that not everything was alright; something in the real world was amiss.

"Will, I need you to wake up." The voice was closer, lulling and appealing with its gentle familiarity. Will murmured something incoherent, even to him, and he opened his eyes blearily, the scent of something sharp just under his nose.

Hannibal stared back at him, concern etched into the dips and furrows of his brow.

"What are you doing here?" Will mumbled, stretching. The subtle light of the lamps was easy on his eyes, allowing him to wake slowly, leisurely.

“I could ask you the same,” Hannibal replied lightly. Will lowered his arms, and it was then that he realized that he wasn’t waking up in bed with Hannibal staring down at him; he wasn’t laying down at all, but standing, and standing in a room that wasn’t his own.

“Wh-wh-” He looked around the room and recognized it as Hannibal’s formal living room, the curtains drawn closed, the lamps providing a comforting ambiance that didn’t aid whatsoever in lowering his pulse that spiked erratically. He looked down at his clothes, clad in nothing more than pajama bottoms and an old t-shirt, then to Hannibal who observed with a critical expression.

“How did I get here?” Will asked, spinning about. His heart shook furiously against his lungs, and he gulped in a breath. “How did I…?”

“You knocked on my door about ten minutes ago, and when you were unresponsive it occurred to me that you were sleepwalking. I led you here, and I looked at your car. You appeared to have driven here alone, no obvious indications of hitting anyone or anything.”

“I couldn’t have driven, I…no,” Will stammered.

“Calm down, Will,” Hannibal soothed, and he reached out to touch his arm lightly, stopping him leaving the room. “What is the last thing that you remember?”

“I…I remember laying down to go to sleep,” Will replied, and he inhaled a short, squeaky breath. “I went to sleep, and I dreamt…I dreamt that I…”

“Yes?” Hannibal prompted.

“I dreamt that I impaled Abigail on the antlers in the cabin,” Will whispered, and a chill spread over his skin, making him shudder. “Is she…did I…”

Hannibal led him over to a chair and sat him down, his expression grave. He walked away with a phone in hand, and Will realized dumbly that he was also clad in pajamas, a matching satin set at that. He stepped just out of the room, enough that Will could still hear the cadence of his voice, quiet and pronounced, but not make out the words. He wasn’t quite sure that he wanted to hear, anyway; he thought of Abigail, fragile and alone in her recovery room, and a whine crawled up his throat.

When Hannibal returned, he did so with a cup of water that he handed to Will. Will took it numbly, but remembering the last one that he broke, he took a gulp and hastily put it down. Shattered glass passed before his eyes, as well as gentle hands and the feeling of water slipping through his fingers. He blinked, and Hannibal sat across from him, crossing one leg over the other.

“The nurse informed me that no one attempted to get into Abigail’s room, and she’s resting just fine,” he informed Will, and Will’s shoulders slumped in relief as he leaned back on the couch. He reached up and rubbed his eyes, surprised to find that in his sleeping state, he’d remembered his glasses.

“That’s…great,” he said, and his hands fell uselessly to his lap, limp.

“How are you feeling?” Hannibal asked when Will said nothing else.

“I’m fine,” he said, but he shook his head when Hannibal shot him a mildly severe glance. “I’m sorry, I’m not fine at all…I feel…I’m just losing it, aren’t I? It’s like I’m at the bottom of a hill. Every time that I try to walk up, a boulder rolls and knocks me flat on my back, and I just…can’t seem to get a hold. I can’t get a hold on anything.”

“I’m concerned about you,” Hannibal said, and Will laughed humorlessly, ashamed of the burning in his eyes, as though he were about to cry.

“Me too, Hannibal,” he said, and he coughed sharply to try and mask the tremor in his words. “I’m afraid of myself, and I’m afraid for myself.”

“What happened? Something occurred that gave you a sense of your lack of control; what changed?”

“My dad gambles,” Will said after a moment, glancing down to the carpet. “Well, in this town he gambles,” he amended.

“Did he lose a bet?”

“He lost enough that the man he owes the money to is going to live with us until he reaches the end of his bill. He said he doesn’t want to make it hard for *me*, but he’s going to get paid one way or the other.”

“Does that make you feel as though you don’t have a say within your own home?” Hannibal asked.

“I don’t know,” Will said, looking down. “In three days he’s had more of a presence than my father, which tells me that his work hours are exaggerated on his part.”

“So your father is lying about how much he works, and a stranger is living in your home. Coupled with your already tentative grasp on reality, I would say that’s sufficient enough reason to explain why you’d be sleepwalking,” Hannibal said, cupping his chin in hand.

“Why did I come here, though?” Will asked, more to himself than Hannibal. Hannibal smiled.

“I should think that you feel safe enough with me that you can come here at any time, Will,” he chastised lightly. “Even in a state where you are not in command of yourself, I am still a safe harbor.”

“I know,” Will said after a moment, and it surprised even him. He looked over at Hannibal, sitting calmly in his chair, and he smiled a little, crooked. “I feel like…when things become too much, the water too deep, you’re my paddle.”

“I am your paddle,” Hannibal agreed. “How do you feel now, in this moment?”

“…Better.”

“And there is no Garrett Jacob Hobbs that lurks behind your eyes when you blink?” he asked.

“Just an overwhelming amount of embarrassment,” Will said, gaze roving over the room.

“Is the embarrassment because your subconscious took control, and you abhor being out of control? Or is it because someone witnessed it?”

“I don’t like not having control of myself,” Will replied after a moment. His gaze fastened to the rich green plant in the corner near the window, and he studied its waxy leaves. “I have a hard time with the idea that something could happen where I’m not the one deciding for myself –even unconsciously.”

“I’m sure then that you have a certain level of concern for people that lean towards the manipulative. When you sense it, you are especially careful not to surround yourself by them?”

Will laughed wryly, Abigail popping into his head. He leaned his head back and looked at the ceiling, sighing, “I try, at the very least.”

“Sometimes the connections we make are out of our control,” Hannibal said thoughtfully. “The mirror neurons in our brain see something being done, and we find ourselves empathizing or mimicking the action. That is why you avoid such people –so that you don’t become some aspect of them.”

“That’s why I’m here,” Will said with a short laugh. “That, and apparently I sleep drive.” Will yawned, rubbing his eyes as they fought to close. “What time is it?” Hannibal glanced at the clock behind Will, and he stood up.

“It is approximately four-thirteen in the morning,” he replied. “I can’t let you drive home in this state; it would be irresponsible of me. Allow me to lend you my guest bedroom once more.”

The guest bedroom was just as clean as it was before. As Will walked by him into the room, Hannibal stopped him, his hand light on his shoulder. He stepped closer, studying his face as though he could drink in the sight of him for days, an odd tilt to his head that Will couldn’t explain. That close, Will smelled the clean scent of laundry detergent, and the musk of a long faded cologne. He saw the slight whiskering of a beard along his jaw, as well as the faint lines around his mouth from smiling. The carpet pressed against his bare feet, the cotton of his t-shirt itched, and he had the sudden impulse to reach forward and grab onto him, a grip that wouldn’t know how to relax. A second, then two; his heart let out a pointed, heavy thump. He wasn’t aware that he’d been holding his breath until Hannibal reached towards his face slowly, deliberately.

“Your glasses are crooked,” Hannibal informed him, straightening them. Will exhaled when he stepped away, and Hannibal sighed. “What are we going to do with you, Will?”

“Who knows,” Will muttered, and when Hannibal walked away, he closed the door. He ignored the way that his breath fluttered, rapid, like the beating of a hummingbird’s wings.

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He woke to the sound of music, a lilting and haunting melody that found him in the darkest recesses of his mind. He sat curled over the body of Abigail Hobbs, weeping blood, then woke to the sight of faint sage filigree dancing along the walls of the ceiling. He inhaled the taste of blood on his tongue, swallowed it, and sat up, the music dancing along his skin and sinking beneath.

He followed the sound and found Hannibal in his parlor, eyes closed. He sat at the bench by the harpsicord, and his graceful, long fingers danced along the keys, stroking them reverently. If he heard Will’s footsteps, he gave no indication of it. His chin was lifted, head tilted so that his ear could catch the sound. Each note was struck with a confidant precision, a somber elegance, and it made an odd pressure build in Will’s ribs. He found a chair and sat, gaze fastened on the air around them that seemed to come alive with the noise, a world within a world that only included the two of them and the music. It was intoxicating; it was magic. Will couldn’t think of a time where he’d heard someone play music of such refinement, let alone within the comfort of their own home. When Hannibal finished, he found his breath easing from him, a balloon that’d been pricked by a fine-tipped needle.

“Good morning, Will,” Hannibal said, opening his eyes. Will smiled slightly, looking from the piano to him.

“That was amazing,” he said, laughing. “I feel as though I should applaud you.”

“That is a piece I’ve been working on for quite some time,” Hannibal replied, a small, self-satisfied smile on his face. Will had come to realize that more often than not, Hannibal dealt facial expressions very carefully –you had to look closely to catch onto one.

“You composed that yourself?” he asked in disbelief.

“Yes. I’d given up on the piece altogether, but this morning I woke with a renewed sense of purpose.” He stood up and gestured towards the door. Will followed him to the kitchen where he began preparing breakfast, an underlying energy in his steps.

“What sort of purpose?”

“For quite some time, I’ve struggled with bouts of a severe lack of inspiration. It caused my notes to fall flat, my stanzas to feel limp and dispassionate.”

“You feel inspired now?” Will asked, unable to keep the smile from his voice.

“With a certainty,” Hannibal said firmly. “I feel that I can finally finish the piece that I’ve been working on.”

“You’ll have to play it for me when it’s complete,” Will said.

“Have no doubt, Will; when it’s complete, you’ll be the first to know.”

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Jack was waiting for him when Will pulled into the school parking lot. He allowed Will to climb out of his truck, but when he reached for his bag, Jack headed over to him and looked his truck over keenly.

“Good morning, Will,” he said pleasantly.

“Is everything okay?” Will asked warily. There was a moment where he worried that Hannibal had called Jack to tell him of his sleepwalking, but the moment the thought occurred to him, he pushed it away. Hannibal had no reason to tell Jack Crawford anything about him. It wasn’t against the law to sleepwalk.

“First, I have something that I need you to take a look at,” Jack said, and Will immediately shook his head, his backpack a shield between them.

“Hannibal is concerned that my looking at your crime scenes will jeopardize my therapy,” he said, looking down to Jack’s shoes. They were new, a leather that hadn’t yet been broken in. He wondered if he’d treated himself to a pair when he caught the Shrike, or if it was a mere coincidence.

“I just need you to verify something for me,” Jack prompted lightly.

“Does it have to deal with Abigail Hobbs?” Will asked.

“It has to do with the copycat that you analyzed for me,” Jack replied. He looked like he wanted to snatch Will’s backpack from him, but he held himself back.

“Then it’s not my problem,” Will said. The words bothered even him, though, and Jack let out an exasperated noise.

“It is if that copycat is interested in Abigail Hobbs,” he retorted. “Will, I just…want to keep people safe. You can get into these guys’ heads, and I just want you to look.”

“What happens if I can’t get out, Agent Crawford?” Will asked.

“I think you care too much to let that happen,” Jack replied, and he took Will’s lack of response as his ascent. He grabbed the bag from Will’s hands, and he led him towards his car, opening the door like a gentleman. Will climbed in, and as the door closed, he wondered just what he was getting himself into.

It was another public setting, this one in the midst of an art museum. Will could count on one hand the number of times he’d visited an art museum, and they’d all been school related. This time, Jack passed him a jacket with the FBI logo on the back, and he slid it on, feeling more foolish than normal as he followed him past the scattered crowds of agents.

“It’s gristly,” Jack said, as though Will was the one to beg Jack to show him dead bodies. Will wanted to bite out something snarky, but he held himself back, ducking under

the yellow tape and zipping the jacket up. Although his bruises had bled into an abused banana color with green tinges, it was still visible when one moved too close.

It took him a moment to see, and in seeing he found himself decidedly nauseous. He wasn't sure if it was the use of fishing line or the use of props, but once again he was standing in the field with a girl impaled on antlers, Jared Freeman staring at him across the gore.

"We found this about two hours ago. I think they were going for something artistic," Jared said in Jack's voice. Will frowned at him, and Jared winked, bringing a finger to his lips in a gesture of silence.

"Well, it's an iconic piece, Jack," Miss Avery said beside Jared, wiping blood from her lips. Her voice was all wrong, though, a mellow baritone that held a dusting of irony. "The Birth of Venus is a classic."

"So they're a romantic," Jared said, and his voice grew close enough to kiss. "Well? What do you think?"

Will shook his head, and he wasn't in the field with the stag head. He was in a museum in the city, surrounded by FBI agents and a dead body. He stared up at it, the fishing line lifting and posing the body just-so, and even he could see what the scene referenced.

"I think it's tasteless," Will said, clearing his throat to dispel the gravel in it.

"I mean, what do you see?"

He saw death. Someone had taken a woman's bare body and positioned it inside of a large seashell, one hand positioned over her breast, the other covering the beginning of her sex. Her long, flowing hair trailed down her shoulder and stopped at her waist, and she stared glassily down at the floor with a serene, fixated expression.

"I'm impressed they found a shell as large as this," Agent Price said, peeking up from his work. Will recognized him from both his interrogation regarding Jared Freeman, as well as one of the ones that watched while he stood before the stag head. He met Will's eyes, and the lift and turn of his brow when he looked away told him exactly what he thought of Will being there.

"Any Hobby Lobby is going to have something like this," Zeller disagreed with a shake of his head.

"Yes, but can we track purchases of these shells through Hobby Lobby?" Price countered. "If so, we can find him."

"We'll look into it," Jack said, and he motioned for them to step aside. "Will, what do you see?"

"This is the birth of love," Will said. Jack nodded, and he waved towards his men impatiently, dismissive. As they stepped away, he folded his arms and considered the scene

before them.

"It does look like the Birth of Venus," he agreed.

"More than Venus, though," Will said, and he clenched his hands tightly, nails biting into the flesh of his palms. "This is…a declaration of budding romance."

It comes faster, now. What once took silence, a breath of thought, a whisper of an idea, slides into place like the pictures of an old movie projector, stilted but still of good use. The gears click and whir, and a golden ray of light wipes away what was and brings what could be.

I take you, and I mold you. You are of no importance, yet you hold great import, the clay that I will turn into something grand. Unlike others whose hands hold life and dole it out as they see fit, furious at some slight, jealous at lost love, you are nothing more than the paint in which I will decorate my canvas. My sonnet is not recited for you; you are merely the words. There is another I seek, and I will find a way to reach them through you. Although this is not personal, I find it most personal indeed.

You are not Venus, but you will represent my Venus. Venus, my love, the birth of something I have not yet felt in my bones for so long I'd forgotten the way it hums in my veins and breathes life into my work. What is life without passion? What is living without something to work towards? I place your hand just so, that they will see as I do that they have made something within me, stirred me towards a passion I have not had the pleasure of in so long I'd forgotten the taste. It is pleasant on my tongue, as sweet and bitter as the ripest cherry on the tree.

Do you hear the sonnet? Do you see my canvas? Do you feel the clay beneath your hands? If you don't now, you soon will. You are a siren, and I intend to answer the call. This is my design.

Will opened his eyes, stunned to find himself close enough to kiss. His arms were outstretched, as though he were the one tied to the fishing line, and he hurriedly set his arms down and backed away, exhaling the taste of dead flesh. He looked around, but no one seemed to see him too close to be normal, too ingrained in someone else to function as himself. He turned around, and Jack Crawford watched with an impassive stare, one that made his flesh crawl.

"You saw something," Jack said.

"She's not related to him in any way," Will said, wiping his mouth. "He didn't know her personally, and this wasn't about her."

"What is it, then?"

"He's…this is a love letter," Will said.

"To who?"

“That’s the question, isn’t it?” Will laughed, a strangled sort of noise. “It’s a newfound love, something that makes him feel passionate, artistic. He’s using her to…to, ah, reach out. He looks at her like she’s nothing more than a tool, like clay or paint. Whoever he’s doing this for, he wants them to know that he cares about them, and it’s a new feeling for him. He hasn’t killed like this before.”

“A killer gets a crush on someone, so he finds a random person on the street that looks like Venus, and he murders her to reach out to the person he loves,” Jack muttered, and he shook his head, disgusted.

“I don’t think they know,” Will said, glancing back to her. “Whoever this is for, they don’t know what’s going on. He’s trying to reach out the only way that he knows how, but they don’t know how to reach back. If they saw this, they’d be confused.”

“So what happens when the killer realizes his little crush can’t see him the way he sees them?”

“I think this is his hope…he-he wouldn’t hurt them, otherwise they’d be his tools, his supplies. Maybe this is some sort of test, to see if they can see and understand him.” Will found one of the benches and sat down, staring at the display, equal parts awed and afraid.

“So he’s serenading his love, and he’s going to wait for some sort of response? Is this person in danger?”

“No, this is…gentle. He listened to opera as he worked,” Will whispered. “He wove a tapestry, and now he’s going to wait to see how his love is received.”

“If they understand him, Will, do you think they’d return the love letter with a few bodies of their own?”

“Maybe,” he replied, and he took off his glasses to clean them on the bit of his shirt that stuck out from under his jacket. “Or maybe they will simply sit back and enjoy the music.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for all of your continued support for this story! It's looking like there's going to need to be a sequel tbh...so I'm trying to outline what that'd look like :)

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 18:

Marissa was waiting for him when he pulled up to the school the next day. In lieu of a quality Fall coat, he wore the silly FBI windbreaker, backpack strapped across the back to hide the letters. He didn't want to admit it, but the hoodie and jacket were the best clothes he had, apart from some fishing gear his father had bought. He climbed out of the truck, and he ignored her, zipping up the jacket against the brisk cold. He looked out towards the soccer fields, brown with the incoming weather, and he avoided her expectant stare.

"How's…Abigail?" she asked when he didn't speak. She was dressed warmly, a pea coat and scarf buttoned and wrapped with fashionable ease.

"She's fine," he said, an autopilot response.

"Everyone's talking about it…you're some kind of hero, she's some kind of freak." Marissa scuffed the boot of her shoe on the ground.

"Maybe they have it backwards," Will said, shrugging.

"Maybe," Marissa agreed. She paused, then folded her arms tightly across her chest. "Do you think she'd want to see me?"

"Do you think she wouldn't?" Will asked, glancing to her pant leg.

"I don't know; I just don't want her to think I think what those people are saying."

"Are the two of you good friends?" Will asked.

"Best friends," Marissa corrected passionately.

"Then she'd want to see you." Will shrugged, logic coming full circle. He waited for her to leave, to drive away so that he could go and see Abigail himself, but she surprised him as she took a step closer to him, making him take an instinctual step back.

"Would you give me a ride? My…my mom won't take me. She thinks Abigail knew about it. She thinks the whole family was…you know…"

"Eating people?" Will suggested. Marissa blanched.

"Yes."

He wondered if he was going to be stuck perpetually giving rides to any random student that had the fortune of catching him at a vulnerable time. When he unlocked the door

for her and she climbed in, he reasoned that it only made sense for him to give her a ride. Abigail was her best friend, and with no way to see her, she'd be left to her worries that would fester in her head until they became ugly and unrecognizable. Beverly was his friend, so he gladly gave her a ride. Abigail, before everything, saw something that no one else could see –Hannibal excluded, of course.

The drive was spent in silence; Marissa saw him as a means to an end, and now that she wasn't bombarding him with questions about his past, he was happy to not mind. Overhead, the sky cast a grey, gloomy atmosphere attesting to the potential for either snow or rain depending on where the temperature fell. It made for a clean, crisp taste in the air, currents of energy hanging about them.

He checked Marissa into the hospital, and they were led down a different hall, one with far less Lemon Pledge smell and far more wall plug-ins. The air held a faux floral scent, something with a mix of artificial lavender and too much vanilla. They found Abigail outside where the air was cleaner, fresher. She sat in clothes that were obviously new, a scarf wrapped kindly around her neck to hide what almost happened to her. When she saw Marissa, she tossed a book down and smiled. When she saw Will, that smile flickered, faltered.

"Hey," Marissa said, tucking her hands in her jacket pockets.

"Hey," Abigail said, looking from Will to her. There was a pause, a shifting of feet, then the two of them awkwardly embraced, something that even Will looked away at, feeling the discomfort as though it were his own.

"Will brought me here. He said that you'd want to see me." Marissa threw him under the bus, a good scapegoat in case her presence wasn't welcome. Will swallowed down a derisive laugh.

"I do want to see you…thanks, Will," Abigail said. Will glanced over and nodded before he turned, walking along the rows of flowers that fought against the tides of nature. He touched a wilted purple one and studied it, allowing them to step away to talk in private.

"How are you?" Marissa asked, sitting down with her.

"The food here is so-so, but everyone is nice," Abigail replied. Their voices carried around the tiled courtyard, and Will moved farther away, stuffing his hands into his pockets.

"Is it…sorry, I mean-"

"It still hurts," Abigail said curtly.

"Sorry," Marissa murmured, dipping her head.

"It's okay…I'm going to be here awhile. I should get used to questions since that's all they do here. They want me to talk all the time, and they just sit there and ask me questions."

“Everyone thinks you did it,” Marissa said, and Will saw her reach out and grab Abigail’s hand tightly. “I told them that they’re nuts, but some people are talking.”

“…*You* don’t think I did, right?” Abigail asked.

“I don!” Marissa exclaimed. “I *know* you didn’t have anything to do with it. You’re a victim, like those girls and Will.”

A rush of breath hissed from Will’s teeth, and he was glad that he was far enough away that no one heard it. He looked back to them, and he caught Abigail’s eyes over Marissa’s head. She was already looking to him, already knowing what he’d say if he was part of the conversation. He smiled savagely and looked back to the wallflowers struggling to survive.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do,” Abigail admitted to her. “I was going to graduate early, and now…”

“I wouldn’t worry about that,” Marissa urged firmly. “You deserve to rest and relax.”

“Abigail Hobbs?” A new voice asked, and Will turned around, skin chafing at the sound. He recognized the ginger-haired boy from before, the one that Freddie Lounds tried to keep from entering the hospital. Instinctively, he headed towards Abigail when the boy walked over.

“Do I know you?” Abigail asked.

“You’re a cannibal,” he said, and he didn’t seem to see anyone but her. His gaze honed in, predatory, and his lips curled in a snarl. “You ate those girls, and everyone’s treating you like you didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Wh-What?”

“Get away, freak!” Marissa snapped, stepping in front of Abigail.

“Are you a sympathizer?” He demanded. Will reached them, and he shoved Nick back, slamming his palms into the dip underneath his collarbone without thought. The boy stumbled back, and when he saw Will, he froze.

“Remember me?” Will asked quietly.

“How does it feel to be a cannibal lover?” Nick asked, but there was a flicker of fear in his eyes. Will took a step closer, and Nick took a step back.

“I thought I said that you should go?”

“You know she knew about it! You know she helped him!”

“Get out,” Will urged, and he took another step. Nails dug into the indents of his palms, and he had the sudden urge to strike him.

It'd be easy; a simple hit to the throat to incapacitate his breath, then once he's on the ground, step on his neck.

He blinked, and Garrett Jacob Hobbs stood behind Nick, a sinister sneer on his face. He wasn't as he was when he'd been alive; old, dried blood caked the front of his shirt from where Will's shots had struck true, and his eyes were milky from death.

You have to be careful, though. If you don't honor him, it's just murder. You're going to have to eat him.

"What's going on?" Hannibal's voice cut through Hobbs, and he disappeared, his visage nothing more than an imprint on Will's eyes. Nick turned around, and seeing Hannibal, he balked.

"I was just…" his voice trailed off, and he grasped at straws. Before Will could say anything, a rock whistled by his head and struck Nick in the face.

"Oh, son of a-"

"Get out of here!" Marissa yelled, and Nick almost hit the ground, catching himself last minute. His hands fumbled, pushed him up, and blood trickled down the side of his face from a large gash just above his eye. He wildly looked from Hannibal to Will, and he turned, running from them and throwing the door open, letting it slam against the wall in his escape.

The silence after was rife with buzzing energy. Will turned around in disbelief to stare at Marissa, her arm still held suspended, as though she'd just thrown the rock. Behind her, Abigail fought back tears, arms wrapped tight around herself to hold in whatever was trying to spill out.

"Did you do that?" Will asked, more rhetorical than anything else.

"Y-yes…" Marissa said, and she lowered her arm, eyes wild. "He wasn't leaving, and he wasn't supposed to be here!"

"Who was that?" Hannibal asked. He walked over to the bench and set a tray of food down, two plates that most certainly didn't come from the hospital kitchen. Will glanced to him, immaculately dressed in a questionable plaid suit, then to Marissa. A small, wry smile threatened to overtake him.

"That was a good throw," he said. Marissa flushed, equal parts embarrassed and proud.

"I didn't know him," Abigail said through clenched teeth. Hannibal urged her to sit down, and he handed her a plate, utensils set to the side.

"His name is Nick, and I think he's a brother to one of the victims," Will said, looking to the spot Hobbs had once stood in before he looked to Abigail and Hannibal. "Freddie Lounds had him on a leash last time I was here."

"Freddie Lounds?" Abigail's voice spiked, then dropped.

“Did she come to see you?” Will asked.

“She spoke to me,” she replied, not looking up from her food. She turned the salad over with her fork with slow deliberation.

“She’s egging him on for a story,” Will spat, sitting down on a bench across from them. Excitement over, Marissa sat down beside him.

“Do you think so?” Abigail glanced up at him, then back down quickly, taking a bite of food. Beside her, Hannibal cut the meat on his plate with slow deliberation, not at all minding the fact that the plate was on his lap rather than a table.

“Yes. When that didn’t work, she tried to get one from me.”

“Is she so bad? She said that she could get the truth out there, that way people don’t think I’m responsible for…for anything,” Abigail paused, her grip on her fork tightening. “She said she wants to help me so that people don’t try to do things like that anymore.”

“I think she’ll say anything if it meant that she got an exclusive interview from you. She cornered him, cornered me, then went to you.” Will shared a glance with Hannibal who looked up, his smile subtle but true.

“At least you were there to keep Nick away from her –twice, now,” he said. “And of course, Miss Marissa. Abigail has told me much about you.”

“It was nothing,” Marissa said, unabashed. “That’s what friends are for.”

“If he means harm, we need to inform the hospital not to let him back in,” Will said. “He probably saw Marissa and me walk in and used us as a cover.”

“I can inform Jack that he should also be watched. That sort of fixation is unhealthy on a young mind,” Hannibal agreed.

“Do you think he’d do anything to me?” Abigail asked.

“We can’t be sure, but safety is our top priority for you.” Hannibal took a bite of food and chewed thoughtfully. “We don’t want any accidents to happen.”

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“Do you visit Abigail a lot?” Will asked when they were in Hannibal’s office. He walked around, Nick’s presence at the hospital something that slithered through his veins and refused to let him sit still.

“I have a few times, yes. Does that bother you?” Hannibal said in his usual chair, hands clasped across his chest. Will looked out of the window at a few people walking along the sidewalk, and he shrugged. It rippled, a slow motion movement.

“No. I just wonder what she says to you.”

“She openly grieves,” Hannibal replied, and his chair shifted slightly. “She grieves her mother who seems to have fallen by the wayside in the aftermath of these other girls. She grieves her father, who was loving up to the point that he wasn’t. She grieves you, who was lost in the chaos and did what no one else had to do. She fears you will grow to resent her.”

“I don’t resent her,” Will said sharply, turning around. “I…I don’t know how to feel.”

“You’re unsure if your affection is wholly yours, or if you only feel such things because of Garrett Jacob Hobbs,” Hannibal clarified, turning around to look at Will. “Where it is a harmless thing, why question it?”

“It’s not harmless if I hurt someone because of it,” said Will, avoiding his gaze.

“Abigail?”

“I saw Garrett Jacob Hobbs behind Nick today. He told me the best way to incapacitate the boy, and how I could easily kill him then and there. The threat to Abigail would be gone if he was out of the way.”

“Do you think Nick will try to kill her?” Hannibal asked.

“I don’t know, I haven’t…gotten into his head yet. He’s angry, he’s…he’s hurt, and he’s confused. He doesn’t know where to direct his anger or his pain, so he’s blindly shooting arrows until one hits its mark.” Will gestured lamely with his hands, resting them on his hips as he leaned against the windowsill.

“You’ve gotten into someone else’s head, though. Otherwise, I don’t think you’d be seeing Garrett Jacob Hobbs.” Somehow, he saw. Will looked to the edge of the rug, and he nodded, blinking away the burning in his eyes.

“I’ve tried to go to school twice now,” he said, a mocking ring to his voice. “And both times I’ve been pulled away.”

“This was the second time?” Hannibal asked.

“The first was yesterday, when Jack Crawford ambushed me and asked me for help.” He found himself pacing at that, taking the length of the study and staring at the bookcase for a prolonged moment before he turned around. “I don’t know what he sees in me, but he wanted my input on another case.”

“He took you to another crime scene?” Displeasure colored Hannibal’s voice, and he steepled his fingers, studying Will.

“This was different…I don’t know how to explain it.” Will looked around and reached up, rubbing his temples. “Do you have an aspirin?”

“Another headache?” Hannibal asked.

“I can feel it starting,” Will replied. Hannibal walked out of the room and returned with two pills, handing Will his usual glass of water with them. He choked them down and

swallowed a mouthful of water, setting it on the windowsill beside him as Hannibal sat down once more, shoulders set as he, no doubt, thought of how he was going to rebuke Jack Crawford for his behavior.

"Try to explain," he prompted lightly.

"This was a poem," Will said, and he rubbed his palms on his pant legs. "Whoever they are, they're an artist. They took a woman and strung her up like the painting 'Birth of Venus' and they meticulously set her hair so that it even flowed like the painting."

"Did they love her?" Hannibal asked.

"No, no, she was an instrument, the medium for his vocation. This killer has fancied himself in love, and this is to commemorate that emotion." Will shook his head, looking across the room before he paced the length once more. "He wants to be seen, understood, and he wants such feelings to be reciprocated."

"A fledgling killer?"

"No…his was too precise, too immaculate. They've killed, but the symbolism of this is too pronounced to be something that happens to them all the time. There's an excitement, a genuine euphoria in killing. Not just killing, though; in creating. They want to see where this takes them."

"Does that repulse you?" Hannibal inquired. Will paused mid-step, and he let out a loose, shaky breath.

"It should."

"That wasn't my question," Hannibal replied.

"…I can't see their face, but I feel their emotions as though they were my own. I feel…nervous. But I'm not normally nervous; the me that is Will Graham is, but not this self that I feel in this moment. This me is not normally so close to the edge, the tipping point between being revealed and being hidden away, my secrets my own. I…I have killed, and it has been good. It has been necessary. It has been impulsive. I have created things of such greatness, such…depth, but never have I used a body to convey a string of emotions so poignant and vulnerable.

"There is the question I hear –do they see me? Do they see me as I see them so clearly? Across this expanse that is you and I, a sharing of like minds and ideas, can they look at this and see precisely what I want them to see? If they stood before such a masterpiece that is my heart on this platter, would they draw away from me, or would they take a deliberate step closer? There is a weakness, an opening in sharing such a self, but never have I ever wanted to share this part of my life with another so badly. The vulnerability is as exciting as it is maddening." He exhaled, and he could see the woman before him, head tilted down with such kindness and supplication that it made him sick. This was his masterpiece, his creation. Underlying his unease, a certain level of pride filtered through.

“You have a beautiful mind, Will,” Hannibal sat at last, standing up. “You are able to see things through the eyes of the people around you, and as much as it pains you it is wholly unique and lovely.”

“It feels like there are a thousand people underneath my skin. At any given point, I cease to exist because what they have to say is more prevalent.”

“No one has taken full command of you yet,” Hannibal said, and he walked over to squeeze Will’s shoulder. “If that time comes, I’m your paddle.”

“You’re my paddle,” Will agreed firmly. Somehow, Hannibal’s touch didn’t seem to bother him.

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Abigail called that night, and thankfully Will’s dad wasn’t home. Charlie was out working on his car, and Will grabbed the phone, absconding to his room with Winston so that no one heard the conversation. Winston paced about the room before he decided that the bed was best, and he lounged across it.

“Hey,” Abigail said quietly.

“Hey.”

“You didn’t have to bring Marissa today, you know,” Abigail said, but it wasn’t quite what she wanted to say. Will leaned back on the bed beside Winston and scratched the dog’s side, basking in his warmth.

“I told you that I feel an inordinate amount of responsibility for you. That includes your happiness,” he replied.

“You came too,” she noted, and that was what she wanted to get at. Will nodded, then remembered that she couldn’t see.

“I said I’d come back.”

“Yeah, but people say things all the time, and I –thanks, Will.” She was flustered, a sense of aggression directed at herself rather than him, and for some reason it made Will smile a little.

“It was no trouble; who needs school?”

“Are you going to get into trouble?

“The principal is passionate about me taking as much time as it takes for the media to lose interest in ambushing me in a place of learning,” he said dryly.

“That’s kind of him.” Abigail let out a slow breath that crackled on the phone line. “I’m scared to go to sleep, Will,” she confessed.

“Do the nightmares always find you?” Will wondered.

“Do they find you?”

“Every night,” he whispered, and he removed his glasses to toss them on the nightstand.

“I think maybe yours are worse –do you dream of killing?”

“Most times,” he said, then, “almost every time.”

“Can I ask…how it felt?” Will frowned up at the ceiling, holding his breath as she spoke. That wasn’t the kind of question someone answered, not when the tang of acid was so heavy on your tongue speaking made it blister on the way out. What had the nurse said? She was in a difficult place mentally? He glided his fingers along Winston’s side, and the dog licked his palm.

“It’s the most horrible thing I’ve ever felt,” he finally said, acid burning on his lips, his jaw, his neck. “The most terrible thing I’ve ever done.”

She had no words for that. At her core, Abigail knew she was the sole cause of the pain he felt, and she knew that because of her actions, he’d never combat her over it. She was finally able to see, as Will had realized with shocking clarity, that love, despite all of its wonderful and beautiful things, could be pretty ugly indeed. Whoever held the most of it contained the least amount of power. Will listened to her silence and knew without her having to speak that she was having to come to terms with these things.

“Good night, Will,” she finally murmured.

“Good night, Abigail,” he replied, hanging up.

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The next day, Marissa Schurr was reported missing by parents who’d received a lock of her hair and a bit of antler in a non-descript envelope. The day after, her body was found in Garrett Jacob Hobb’s trophy room, mounted on a pair of antlers.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for all of your amazing feedback and support! You can connect with me on tumblr as elfnerdherder --come say hi!

Just so you know, I will be moving this coming weekend, so I can't guarantee an update for you within my normal 5-6 days. What with finishing packing, trying to get a scrap yard to come get my jeep, finishing up work here, and all that jazz, I think I'm going to set aside my chapter work and just focus on that! That will ensure that when I'm able to

update (sometime next week) that the chapters will still contain the (hopefully) normal and consistent depth that I'm trying to maintain for you guys with each update on all of my fics.

Thanks so much for your understanding! :) Have a great week!

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 19:

"Why does Jack want us there?" Will asked in the car. It was noon on Thursday, and Hannibal drove towards Garrett Jacob Hobbs' cabin, expression grave.

"Agent Crawford wants *you* there, but I'm uncomfortable with you going alone, in truth," he replied, glancing at Will. In the background, a light classical piano played on the radio, and Will leaned back into the leather seat to soak up its calming ambiance.

"Afraid I'm going to lose myself?" Will asked, too tired to truly be snarky.

"After everything that's happened, I find it irresponsible of him to ask you to see such graphic depictions of violence when you're only eighteen. To then ask you to come to a crime scene where you were also a victim of Garrett Jacob Hobbs is almost a form of punishment." There was a defensive tremor in his words, and Will laughed a little, smoothing the wrinkles out of his khakis.

"I appreciate you coming," he said, studying his dockers. The shoe string had snapped on one, but it'd been an easy enough fix. "Maybe you can keep my head on right."

"The goal is to keep you focused, and if he pushes towards a dark place, you have a hand to pull you back," Hannibal affirmed.

"What happens if I accidentally drag you in?" Will asked. The car ate miles of road before Hannibal answered, trees sliding by like the reels of an old movie, the sky a perpetual grey that didn't seem to want to abate.

"I suppose we'll be there together, then," he said. It didn't sound so bad, when he said it like that. Together. A word filled with unspoken promise.

His car hauled them along the dirt road with ease, taking the curves and bends of the access road like it knew the path to take. When they parked behind the multiple SUV's, Will grabbed his FBI windbreaker and slid it on, climbing out of the car. Hannibal glanced at his attire and smiled, making no comment. When he looked towards the cabin, his expression flickered to resignation.

"Thank you for coming," Jack said, shaking Hannibal's hand when they found him. "How's Dr. Du Maurier?"

"As busy as ever, but she does find time to grade my papers and studies," Hannibal said with a smile. "I thought that I'd come with Will to ensure that everything went well."

“Still worried about him, are you? Will’s been great,” Jack said, and he turned, clasping Will’s shoulder. “How are you feeling?”

“I have a headache,” Will said. Pain killers were produced, although Hannibal gave him a warning glance as Will dry swallowed them.

“I’ve tried to keep this place as untouched as possible for you; I need you to take a look.” Will led them past the place that Garrett Jacob Hobbs breathed the last of his breaths, and he paused, staring down at the dirt. The weeks had taken away the bloodstains, rain washing away the scene where he’d become one with his monster. Will dragged the toe of his shoe through the spot, then stared at the place that Abigail almost joined him. At the sound of the cabin door squeaking, he looked up, and he followed them in, ignoring the cursory glances of those that milled about, waiting on him to be able to go about their own jobs.

“We’ve confirmed that it’s Marissa Schurr,” Jack said, slowly walking up the stairs. “When we confirmed her DNA, we matched the antler horn with one of the pieces that’d gone missing from the evidence locker and looked here.”

“Very clever, Agent Crawford,” Hannibal said, waiting for Will before he started up the stairs.

“Not clever or fast enough,” Jack said, and he paused at the landing and allowed Will to move ahead of him. Each step he took felt like a mile, eons spanning each placement. As he reached the top, he paused, the stench of blood so heavy that the air was dank with it. He hesitated, and behind him he heard Hannibal cough to release the taste from his tongue.

“She’s dead,” Will said, reaching the top. It wasn’t so much a declaration as it was a statement of mourning. He walked into the room and stared at the familiar, haunting antlers of the previously deceased, and just across from him where he’d once been tied up, a body lay impaled on the antlers that’d rested just above his head. Her skin was discolored, her head down; her hair hid the expression of placid acceptance that she mostly likely would have as a corpse. Below her body, blood pooled and spread, a deep burgundy that was almost costume if it hadn’t smelled so real.

“She’s missing organs,” Jack said, and Will nodded. Of course she would be. Why else would she be impaled? Why else would she be strung up like she was a deer, a piece of meat? He closed his eyes, swallowed heavily, and opened them, staring at the scene before him as though he were staring at a fond memory. The thought repulsed him, ate through him, and he stuffed his hands into his pockets, coughing.

“What do you see?” Jack asked.

“It’s the same as the one in the field,” he said shakily. “She was alive when this happened to her. She’s…the same.”

“Her screams still permeate the air,” Hannibal said quietly. Will nodded in agreement.

“You think the person that did this is copying Garrett Jacob Hobbs?” Jack asked.

“I think he’s demonstrating that he’s better than Hobbs,” Will replied. He moved closer, a fish on a hook, and his feet stopped just at the edge of the blood. “He’s celebrating murder for the sake of murder. Hobbs used each piece of the body, but this one doesn’t need to. It’s sadistic. He took his trophy, and nothing else mattered.”

“A copycat looking to overstep his predecessor,” Jack murmured.

“He was killing before this,” Will said. “Hobbs is just convenient. He’s toying with you, Agent Crawford.”

“Do you think so?” Jack asked skeptically. There was the creak of a step, and Hannibal was beside Will, leaning in close.

“There’s something in her mouth, and there’s bruising on her face,” he noted.

“We already have someone running tests. It looks like she fought her attacker,” Jack said.

“She *knew* her attacker,” Will realized. His thoughts scrambled, and he took a step back, whirling around to look at Jack. “The other day, a boy by the name of Nick found a way into the hospital and harassed Abigail Hobbs. Marissa threw a rock at him, and he left.”

“Nick Boyle?” Jack asked. Will shrugged, but Jack’s face darkened. “Nicholas Boyle is the brother of Cassie Boyle, the girl we found on the stag head.”

“Jack, do you think that young man killed his sister and went after Marissa after she assaulted him?” Hannibal asked. Will looked back to Marissa, and he shook his head, mouth dry.

“I’m going to put out an APB,” Jack said, and he grabbed his phone, turning away from them to make a call.

“Whoever did this also killed the woman in the museum,” Will said quietly. His skin was clammy, and he rocked back on his heels.

“What makes you think that?” Hannibal asked. He stepped closer, and his presence seemed to bolster Will, something steady and formidable.

“It has the same tones; these aren’t people, they’re tools. They are a means to an end, and whatever made them special in life is unimportant to him.” Will gestured towards her body, his gut knotting itself. “There is clear discontent and genuine contempt.”

“She is a friend to Abigail, and she is clearly ready to defend her,” Hannibal said.

“The love letter was for her,” Will realized, and he rounded on Jack when he got off of the phone. “Jack, the love letter was for Abigail. If that DNA is Nicholas Boyle’s, then he murdered his sister to embody Garrett Jacob Hobbs, wrote a love letter to Abigail, and when he went to see her about it, Marissa assaulted him. This is his revenge.”

“Are you sure?” Jack demanded.

“Is the DNA his?” Will pressed.

“It’s being sent to the lab to find out,” Jack said, and he motioned Will closer, lips drawn taut. “Thank you, Will.”

“Is someone going to see to Abigail?” he asked, walking away from Marissa. The thread that pulled him close was still there, and he felt it stretching, pulling tight against his ribs as he walked away.

“We’ll send agents to the hospital to ensure that she’s alright,” he replied. They were led out of the Shrike’s Nest, but as Will was deposited in the passenger seat, he watched Hannibal pull Jack to the side, his posture implying that all wasn’t well. Will wasn’t necessarily one for eavesdropping; he made an exception. He discreetly unrolled the window and leaned against it, craning to catch the cadence of his voice.

“I know you spoke with Dr. Du Maurier and myself regarding Will’s psyche, but really I must insist that this is the last time you use him for your work,” Hannibal said. “Will is in a delicate place right now, and constantly bombarding him with grotesque images of dead bodies isn’t going to help his recovery let alone when those bodies are of people he knows well.”

“He has had a choice every time,” Jack said, unconcerned. “I didn’t force him to come along.”

“No, but you implied that he could save lives.”

“He has *already* saved lives with his insight,” Jack retorted. “Which is why I asked for his help again.”

“Are you not concerned with his own well-being and safety?” There was a thread of accusation, of words said but unsaid. Jack’s face darkened at his question, and he folded his arms, chest puffing out somewhat.

“He’s fine,” he said. “If I thought he wasn’t fine, I wouldn’t ask for his help.”

“On that, I believe that we have to disagree,” Hannibal replied. “I think that after what happened to him regarding Jared Freeman, you’ve decided that his life and his world are forfeit from the same consideration you’d give any other citizen because it’s beneficial for you to believe that.”

“You’re not a psychiatrist,” said Jack.

“And neither are you. You’re unfit to determine his mental state.” They stared one another down, testing, probing. Time had told Will that adults abhorred being corrected most of all, especially when met with facts and logic from a younger and potentially more educated person. While Jack didn’t seem sensitive, he was being stared down by a twenty-four-year-old who stood a head taller, eyes flat and unforgiving. His chin jutted out stubbornly, and Will imagined a bull dog prepared to growl.

“I suppose that in the end, that’s Will’s decision,” Jack said.

“Yes,” Hannibal agreed, and he shook his hand. It wasn’t so much a shake as it was a contest of strength, and Will quickly rolled his window up, slumping further down when Hannibal climbed into the car.

“To Abigail?” he asked.

“To Abigail,” Hannibal said pleasantly. No thread of frustration or indignation wormed its way in his voice. He drove through the familiar curves, and the farther away from Marissa Schurr they went, the tighter the invisible cord wrapped around Will grew.

-

Abigail was in her room when they arrived, confusion warring on her face as well as pleasure. She put down her book and stood up, glancing from Will to Hannibal expectantly.

“Did Nick try to come back after the other day?” Will asked abruptly.

“Who? Oh, that guy? No,” Abgail said, glancing to Hannibal. He stood by her bed, long fingers gliding along the blanket that’d been folded down. “Is everything alright?”

That was where Will fumbled. He could discuss Garrett Jacob Hobbs with her because he’d been there in the same moment as she had, sharing breaths of terror and fear alike. He started to guide her to sit down, then stopped. His hand flexed at his side, and he looked to Hannibal for help.

“Nicholas Boyle is right now the prime suspect in a murder case,” Hannibal said lightly, pinching a hair from the blanket and throwing it away. “Abigail, I think it best if you sit down.”

She sat down, eyes flickering from Will to Hannibal, unsure of who to focus on. Will drew closer to her window, tongue making a dry clicking sound against the roof of his mouth when he tried to swallow.

“You’re making me nervous,” she said.

“After the other day, Marissa disappeared,” Hannibal began, and he drew closer to Abigail, sitting down beside her. “She was found this morning.”

There are many implications to such a statement. A lost person that is found is met with joy, with tears of relief as the anxiety is finally given an outlet to deplete. A misplaced person found is met with indignation, a stern reprimand but a genuine hug after, fingers laced together to ensure they’re not misplaced again. In this case though, his tone conveyed what words couldn’t. Marissa didn’t just disappear, she was taken. She wasn’t just found, she was found dead. Abigail’s expression cracked, and an exhausted sort of grief set in. She slumped into her chair, the weight of his words doing far worse damage than a physical assault.

“My condolences,” Hannibal said gently, and he drew out a handkerchief for her. Abigail took it and covered her face, a dragging, furious sob scratching from her mouth. Her

body heaved with the effort, and Will found himself kneeling before her, his neck hot.

"Will," she cried, and she slid from the couch to throw her arms around him, clinging for dear life. He wasn't expecting it, and he hesitated before he slowly wrapped his arms around her. She was petite, and he felt every knot of her spine in her back as his hands rested there, and he looked up to Hannibal.

"I'm going to protect you," he said, and his words seemed to bolster even him. His hold on her tightened, locking her in place. "We both are."

"We're your family now," Hannibal said warmly. "We're going to take care of you."

She cried openly, and if she heard them she gave no indication. She merely sobbed into his shoulder, nails digging so sharply into his neck that he knew he'd find the marks later. It was fine, though. Everything was going to be alright.

He'd make sure of it.

-

Charlie was at the house when he got home, dinner sitting on the counter. Will inhaled the promise of something hot and unprocessed, and his stomach lurched at the thought of real food. What little tidbits Hannibal had given him made him hungry for something substantial and real. He wondered wryly if that was a thought towards the food, or if he'd become so accustomed to his presence of friendship that he meant that, too.

"How was school?" Charlie asked, glancing up from doing the dishes. Winston bounded out from around the counter and nearly bowled Will over, eager and pleasant as his tail flailed and his tongue lolled. Will laughed and slumped onto the floor, grabbing the dog and hauling him into his lap to hold him close.

"Fine," he said between bouts of Winston trying to lick him. Will dug his fingers into his fur and held on tight, the undying and unquestioning love from the dog somehow easing over his mental wounds to mend some of them.

"Did you actually go?" Charlie asked curiously. Will considered lying, but at the recollection of Charlie being a walking lie-detector, he shrugged.

"No."

"I appreciate your honesty," Charlie said, and he set two plates down at the kitchen table.

"Are you trying to be my father?" Will asked, hauling himself up. Spaghetti with actual sauce and freshly made garlic bread assaulted him, and he could hardly believe the freshly grated parmesan cheese in one of their few bowls.

"Not at all, but sometimes the rigors of day-to-day life are best met with some form of normalcy," Charlie replied. He sat down at the table with a beer, and Will sat across from him, leaning in to sniff the food once more.

“It smells good,” he allowed, grabbing his fork.

“That is a recipe that my grandmother passed down before she died,” he said with a smile. “I’m happy to share it with you if it means you get a decent meal.”

“That’s what Hannibal told me,” Will said without thinking. Charlie looked up from his food curiously.

“Hannibal?” he asked.

“I’m seeing him for counseling,” Will replied reluctantly. Was that supposed to be a secret? Was that not something he should share? He spun the noodles around on his fork, and he took a bite, slurping them up. Charlie tracked the movement, chewing his food thoughtfully, before he nodded and looked down to a magazine beside his plate.

“Your dad mentioned counseling,” he said. “He said he couldn’t afford it.”

“I found someone that works pro-bono,” Will replied. “My dad talked about me?”

“Well, now that we’re all aware of your existence, yes. He said the two of you were coming from some rough stuff back home, but you’re doing better now.”

“Yeah,” Will agreed.

“Do you think that? Do you really think you’re doing better now that you’re here?”

Will didn’t have an answer for that. Thankfully, Charlie didn’t seem to need to hear one. They ate in silence while Will mulled over his general existence in Wolf Trap, and when it came time to clean up Charlie let the conversation go. Will thanked him for dinner, and Winston followed him to his room where he sat at the edge of the bed and stared down at the body of Garrett Jacob Hobbs at his feet.

“I killed you,” he told him, as conversational as he could make it. Speaking with the dead that were mere conjuring of a sick mind wasn’t exactly a blasé affair, but he was trying.

“Do you see?” Garrett Jacob Hobbs asked him.

“No,” said Will, scratching Winston’s ear.

“I think you’re lying,” Garrett Jacob Hobbs whispered, and he smiled, blood trailing from his mouth. “Jared tells me you think about killing people all of the time now. You’re so good at it, why recreate another’s fantasy when you could make your own?”

Will sighed, dismal. “You didn’t kill those girls to recreate a fantasy. You did it to prolong what you felt was the inevitable.”

“I honored them. It wasn’t murder.”

“Well your honoring them brought out someone that’s going to end up killing your daughter if you aren’t careful,” Will said sharply. That troubled Hobbs; his milky, dead eyes

darkened, and his hand crossed over to cover one of the ugly, grotesque bullet wounds.

"He won't honor her," he said.

"No, he won't," Will agreed.

"You do, though. You love her as I did," he continued, and Will shook his head sharply, digging his fingers into the mattress.

"I'm better than you are. I'm not going to devour her in the end," Will snarled.

"As long as you prevent someone else from devouring her," Hobbs replied, and as the blood wept from his wounds, he went still. Will took two aspirin and laid down, Winston curled up beside him. He fell asleep with Hobbs' body lying underneath his bed.

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Will woke at 2:13 A.M. to a strange sound. Be it the way the wind didn't quite cut through the branches the same way they normally did, or the creak of a mattress that didn't turn just-so, Will woke up and stared at the ceiling, his breath cut short. Winston still slept beside him, a warm and gentle presence, but when the sound came again, even he lifted his head with perked ears. It occurred to him, not for the first time, that maybe his moving to Wolf Trap was a terrible idea, and if he'd been brave enough he'd have told Charlie that.

The sound came a third time. Will swung his legs over the edge of the bed and grabbed the knife from his night stand, heading towards the window.

It wasn't Abigail Hobbs, prepared to betray him underneath the filtered moonlight. It wasn't Garrett Jacob Hobbs with an antler in hand, nor was it Jared Freeman with a gun. It was Nicholas Boyle, and somehow that was worse. Will felt his blood boil, his skin hot as he threw the window open and launched himself out of it, uncaring of the cold fall ground underneath his feet. Nicholas took a hesitant step towards him, but that was too much.

"What are you doing here," he seethed, grabbing him. He swung Nicholas around and slammed him against the tree, knife up to his throat before he could blink.

"Y-You don't understand, man, you don't-"

"You couldn't get to Abigail, so you came for me? Is that it?" he hissed, and he heard a low, primal hum in the back of his head that whispered that it'd be easy to open his throat. The blood would look black in the moonlight, it said, and it'd be beautiful.

"No, no! I need your help, man, I just need-"

"You need to go to sleep now," Will said, and he didn't recognize his own voice. "Forever."

-

He came to in waves, a soothing lull that gave him a feeling of peace, of serenity. He inhaled the taste of fresh, cold air, and his veins thrummed, welcoming the morning. He felt like part of a whole entity, a cog in the wheel of something magnificent, something grand. As his eyes opened, he looked across the expanse of a field, and somehow it was right; it was just. His feet dug into the rich earth beneath him, and he wondered if Stammets had ever felt so cohesive; if he'd ever felt so right. Maybe if he'd felt like Will did in this moment, he wouldn't have had to bury those people to connect to them.

When he looked down at the body of Nicholas Boyle though, he realized that maybe he wasn't so different from Stammets after all.

Chapter End Notes

So I wasn't expecting to be able to update this today, but...well, the trailer is 2 hours late, and I've gotten as much done as I can until they get here so that we can load stuff, so I'm sitting cross-legged in in my front room, waiting. Turns out this didn't need as much editing as I thought, so here we are! A *hopefully* happy surprise :)

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 20:

There was a time, when Will was much younger, that his father lost him in a store. Will didn't blame his father for losing him; much like one loses something they're fond of, sometimes the tides of time or circumstance are such that you blink and what you hold dear is gone. Will could remember his distinct lack of panic as he looked about the busy building, and he walked down aisle after aisle, searching. When he reached the electronics, he stepped into an aisle and there was a flash of light as the fluorescents above him went out. He stood in the center of the aisle, and he was left in a sort of stagnant, tepid darkness. When standing became too tiresome, he took off his coat and laid it on the ground, sitting down beside it. Next came a toy yo-yo he'd brought with him, as well as a sticker he'd gotten at the bank. He found a crayon, then an eraser, and he lined them up beside one another with uniform distances between each one.

When his father found him, he fell to his knees before him and fought back tears, desperately gathering up Will's things like he could put the moments back together from before he'd lost them. Will could recall with sharp clarity his father grabbing his things and placing each one back where they went, and he remembered thinking, if only time was as simple as that. When one lost it, they merely put it back.

Time holds no such mercy. When it is lost, there is no recovery.

He stared down at Nicholas Boyle, and there was a heavy ringing in his ears that told him that this was real. His lips parted, as though to tell him otherwise, but it was futile; the tang of blood turned the air a misty red, and the knife in his hand was most certainly his. Nicholas Boyle's eyes were accusing, and he stumbled back from him, a wheezing breath coating the back of his throat and almost causing his stomach to release its contents. He spun about, and much like before, he saw his house in the distance, a boat adrift in a sea of fog. Safe. The house was supposed to be safe.

He didn't recall reaching the house. Suddenly he was running, and then he was there. His father and Charlie were already gone to work, and he slammed through the front door and looked about, chest ballooning with the effort for breath, for air that didn't leave a metallic taste. His feet carried him to the phone where he dropped the knife and picked it up, fingers shaking over the numbers. This wasn't self-defense. This wasn't protection. This was murder, pure and true. He had to call the police, he had to call Jack, he had to-

-he had to call Hannibal.

Hannibal found him in the field thirty minutes later. He was dressed in something warm, a supple, suede leather jacket over a sweater and button-up, and he didn't seem to

mind the dirt as he paused beside Will to look down at his creation. Will stared down at Nick, and he shook his head like it could somehow erase what he'd done.

"What happened, Will?" Hannibal asked. His voice cut through the quiet in the air, as sharp and precise as the knife Will had used to gut his prey.

"I don't know," he whispered.

"You don't know, or you don't remember?"

"I don't remember."

"What is the last thing you remember?" he inquired. Underlying his calm, collected tone though, Will heard a whisper of excitement; of burning curiosity.

"I woke up to him outside of my window," he began, and he swallowed heavily. "I jumped out at him; I was angry. He kept trying to…to ask me for help, but I just…didn't listen. I was so angry –it ate at me, made me see red, until I saw nothing at all." He dropped to his knees beside Nick, and he stared down at his chest. If he hadn't witnessed the girl impaled on the antlers, the sight of his organs and chest exposed to the elements would have made him queasy. Now, he just wanted them to be put away –out of sight, out of mind.

"When you came to, you were standing over him like this?" Hannibal clarified.

"Yes," Will murmured, head bowed.

"And you went to your house and called me?"

"Yes." Will nodded along, faint tremors of unease flitting along his nerves.

"Did you call anyone else? Agent Crawford?"

"No," said Will, and he gasped out a sob, reaching out to try and put everything back, hands sliding across intestines, fingertips brushing against bone that should have never been exposed; he thought of Charlie just awhile ago, mentioning a person that took a life sooner or later found a way to take a second one.

"Will," Hannibal said, but it didn't register, didn't truly *click*, not the way it did when Will stared into Nick's wide eyes underneath the moon as he-

"*Will*," Hannibal pressed, and he knelt down on the other side of the body, grabbing Will's hands. "Will, look at me."

Will looked up at him, and he was aware of the rushed, panting breaths that escaped from him. They chafed against his ears, and he shook his head, not wanting to taint Hannibal with the blood that seeped through the pores of his skin.

"What do I do?" he wheezed, and he shook, the last leaf fighting against the inevitable turn of winter. "Hannibal, what do I do?"

Hannibal considered him, and if he minded the blood on Will's hands, he didn't show it. He reached up and delicately adjusted the crooked turn to Will's glasses, and he cupped his cheeks with both hands. Will smelled the blood just underneath his nose, smeared across his cheek, but his breath caught as Hannibal leaned close to him, breath fanning across his face.

"In this moment," he said, mouth ghosting just along his skin, "you are at your most beautiful, Will Graham."

He thought to protest, but all thought fled entirely when Hannibal's lips pressed against his.

He'd never been kissed before; relationships were something that were foreign, hands that held but squeezed too tight, mouths that tilted and quirked before falling flat. He was more than aware of his chapped lips, his tainted skin, and his mussed hair, but he was equally aware of the softest of touches, of hands that cradled but did not break, and lips as smooth as silk. His hands half inside the chest cavity of Nicholas Boyle didn't seem to deter Hannibal. If anything, poised over his corpse as they were, he seemed to delight in it. One hand slid to the back of Will's neck, the other sliding into his curls. His lips were gentle, tender.

He pulled away, the merest fraction of an inch, and Will let out a short, surprised gasp of breath. His eyes fluttered shut, and his heart thudded once, twice; the sound alone startled him.

"What…" he couldn't find the words. In all of his thoughts, in all of his imaginings of what Hannibal would say when he saw the marks of his sins, this wasn't it. His lips tingled, and the sudden, rash urge to kiss him once more was overwhelming. When Hannibal didn't speak, he pressed his lips closer, and that was all the invitation that was needed. Hannibal kissed him ravenously, a starved man with no food, a prisoner finally touching free soil again. His grip in his hair tightened, the hand on his neck locking him into place so that even if Will wanted to, he couldn't move.

Not like he wanted to.

Hands reached up to grasp the front of Hannibal's sweater, uncaring of the stains that marred, uncaring of the stench of death that permeated the air. Hunger was his name, and Will was answering that need that growled just beneath his skin. Teeth clashed against skin, and an odd noise sounded from him as Hannibal nipped him, hard enough to draw blood. It didn't scare him, though; there was an excitement in him not being held like a fragile teacup, like he would break when cast to the stone. Hannibal held him like he was steel, like he would only change if applied to the right elements. His heart pounded against his bones, and in that moment, he'd never felt more alive.

A bird's call sounded off, akin to a human's scream. It sent the two of them back from one another, and Will gaped at him, chest heaving for breath that didn't want to come. Blood stained the front of Hannibal's sweater, as well as a smear along his cheek, and his normally immaculate hair sat askew across his forehead. He stared at Will, and it was akin to the feeling of being stalked by a predator –sooner or later, he was going to be devoured.

"What was that?" Will asked when he trusted his voice.

“A bird,” Hannibal replied evenly.

“No, not that,” he said with a short jerk of his hand. “Before.”

“I was overcome,” Hannibal said, as though it were obvious.

“Because I killed a man?”

“You defended yourself, and you protected Abigail, Will,” Hannibal said gravely, standing to his feet. “That is something to admire, not reject.” He extended his hand, and after a moment, Will took it and stood up, wiping his hands on his pajama pants.

“What do I do?” he asked. He resisted the urge to reach up and touch his lips.

“I understand your reasoning and self-defense, but you did gut him.”

“I did,” Will agreed. The thought made him sick.

“That isn’t something that could stand up in a court of law. They will paint you as mentally unstable and sentence you to a psychiatric institution for criminals for what you’ve done.”

“Even if I tell Jack?”

“Especially if you tell Jack,” Hannibal replied somberly. Will had to agree to that; there was one thing to use a lunatic for your manhunt because they could think like one. It was another to have that same lunatic turn around and commit a murder of their own.

“Then what do I do, Hannibal?” he begged. “What do I do?”

“Are you asking for my help?”

“Yes!” said Will, and he stepped over the body to grab Hannibal’s hands, holding onto them tightly. “*Please* help me. I can’t…I can’t do this alone.”

Hannibal considered him, and it was like the first time they’d met, staring at one another across the hall. Will had felt like an insect pressed to a display board with a pin poised just over him. Now, rather than an insect, he was lethal, something that danced just beyond Hannibal’s reach, but something desired all the same.

“You’re not alone,” Hannibal said at last, reaching up to cup Will’s face. “It will be our little secret.”

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He didn’t go to school Friday, but he forced himself to attend on Monday. He reasoned that the best thing that could happen was to pretend that everything could go back to normal –how could it not? He went to work Saturday, he went to work Sunday, and Charlie went fishing with him afterwards. Things were normal.

Things were normal.

Beverly found him at lunch, and she did what no other student had the confidence to do. She sat beside him, homemade lunch smelling of rich spices and noodles, and she stirred it around with chopsticks, lips pursed.

“Can I say something?” she asked.

“You just did,” Will said with a wry smile.

“You look like hell,” she declared, and his smile grew as he looked down and nodded in agreement. He looked like hell. In the mirror in the bathroom, he imagined brands where Hannibal’s hands had been, burns where blood had spattered. The shadows under his eyes were perpetual, giving him a gaunt appearance. If he cared much for how he looked before, he certainly didn’t now. Too much had happened for him to care.

“I do,” he agreed.

“I know that’s insensitive, and someone else would give me crap for saying it, but I’m genuinely worried about you, Will.” He heard it, too. Beverly was a grounding rod, the one sense of normalcy when everything else around him was a whirlwind that wouldn’t stop.

“I’m worried about me too,” he said after a moment, taking a bite of pizza.

“Are you seeing someone? A therapist? A counselor? Everyone knows that Abigail is in a good place to heal –when they’re not accusing her of eating people –but really, you’re the one that shot a guy. You’re the one that saved her and any other potential victim.”

“Not Marissa,” Will said, and the words dropped and hit the table with an unforgiving thud. “I didn’t save her.”

“No one’s blaming you for that,” she said, and Will looked up towards the skylight. He thought of how they’d disposed of the body, how Hannibal had kindly taken his clothing so that he could clean and dispose of whatever else wasn’t salvageable. Will had passed Clorox wipes over the phone and all but bathed his knife in it. Nicholas Boyle was dead, but no one could know he’d stopped those murders, too. No one could know just how savage he’d become to prevent anyone else from getting hurt.

“I’m seeing a therapist,” he said at last. “To try and keep my head on straight.”

“You’d said it before, I just didn’t know if you’d seen them since…” her voice trailed off, and she shifted in her seat.

“Since Marissa Schurr was gutted for being Abigail’s friend?” he suggested.

“…Yeah.”

“I am. I think I need him now more than ever,” Will said.

“Good. I don’t like having to worry about friends that don’t take care of themselves,” Beverly quipped.

“I take care of myself,” he protested.

“Oh, so you do want your hair to look like that…nice,” Beverly teased, and she reached up to fix a few wild curls. Will allowed it, the willing touch of another human being somehow lessening the impact of what he’d done just a few days before.

When he walked into class, the students stood and applauded. Beverly shifted awkwardly from one foot to another and sat down, but even she had to join in with a laugh. Will glanced about them all and slunk to his seat, ducking his head when they didn’t stop.

“Thank you,” he said, and when it continued, “Please stop that.”

Their applause trickled to a stop, and the kids craned their heads to catch an eyeful of him. One kid turned around and stared at Will, grief plain on his face.

“I knew one of those girls…she was my cousin’s best friend,” he said, and his voice caught. He looked down at the space between them, and he fought to keep his voice controlled. “You…shit, man. What you did was brave.”

“I just tried to survive,” Will replied. The boy nodded, gripping Will’s desk firmly with tears in his eyes as he looked up.

“I told her family what you did, man. They’re just…so grateful they can be at peace now. You did that for them. You did that.”

The teacher came in and silenced everyone’s whispers with a curt wave of their hand, and the boy turned around. The longer class went, discussing traits of an intelligent psychopath, the longer Will thought on what he’d said. Somehow, his actions of self-preservation had given a family he’d never even met some semblance of peace. Now, stained twice by his actions, he wondered if Marissa Schurr’s family would feel the same.

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He was right on time to Hannibal’s, although he’d had to hold himself back from being early. He hadn’t expected to hear a word all weekend from him since there were no sessions on those days, but after his actions he’d almost expected a call of some sort. What did one do after they were kissed over the body of a man they’d killed? Were they to call first? Were they to try and figure out exactly what was going on?

Hannibal let him in, and when Will passed by him, he placed a hand at the small of his back, guiding him further into the house. The touch sent a lazy, pleasurable *zing* along his spine, a silent, possessive marking. When they reached the stairs, he let go, and Will hurried up, well aware of Hannibal’s gaze on his back.

“People are thanking me at school for Garrett Jacob Hobbs,” he said, accepting the glass of water from Hannibal. Hannibal’s eyebrows lifted slightly.

“They think of you as a hero. You did what none of them could do,” he said.

“Only because he tried to kill me,” Will replied, sitting down.

“Yes, but that is not what they see. They see their savior, someone that was able to bring an end to their nightmares. In comparison, how does that feel when put alongside Nicholas Boyle?” Will frowned, and he set the glass down. He didn’t want to break it like the last one.

“One person told me that a family could be a peace, knowing the killer couldn’t hurt anyone anymore. Marissa’s family won’t get that closure. They’ll never find him, never find his…” He couldn’t bring himself to say ‘body’. “His own family will only ever think of how he murdered their daughter. No one can know, but I wish there was a way to tell them that they could be at peace.”

“Do you regret letting me help you?” Hannibal asked.

“No,” said Will, without hesitation. “I only wish they could see that they could grieve in peace.”

“Grief is an interesting notion. You will them to go through the process while doing little yourself. How are you feeling now that a few days have passed?”

“Guilty,” Will whispered. “I keep trying to see myself –and those other girls –through Nicholas’ eyes. I can’t…I can’t quite see it.”

“Is it harder to see the kills others have made now that you’ve done it yourself?” Hannibal asked. Will didn’t want to think about that. He didn’t want to give voice to the way his hands had gripped the knife with such ferocity, burning alive with a vengeance he’d never felt before. He didn’t want to think of the adrenaline-induced high he’d received as he shot one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight…

All that he could do was nod. Now that he’d done it himself, the aspect of seeing another do it was somehow lackluster.

“That is normal. You now have your personal experiences for reference,” Hannibal said.

“I can’t remember one of them, though. What if…what if it wasn’t self-defense? What if I heard him say why he needed my help, and I just…didn’t care?” He clenched his hands into fists in his lap.

“Would that change how you felt about yourself? Would you go to Jack Crawford?”

“It’s a little late for that, isn’t it?” Will asked darkly.

“Not necessarily. You could always confess.”

“…I could,” Will said slowly, “but where does that leave you?”

Hannibal considered him, head tilted. His legs were crossed, head propped causally in one hand with fingers like quotation marks hooked over his cheekbone. Although it seemed genial, there was a dark, probing look in his eyes. Will couldn't keep his stare for long. "Where does that leave me, indeed," he murmured.

"Just as guilty as I am, in their eyes," Will said, looking down.

"Do I need to call my lawyer, Will?" Hannibal asked. Underneath his question, the unspoken: *are you going to betray me when I helped you?*

"I've already dragged you into my darkness," Will said after a moment. "I'm not going to punish you when you've already risked so much for me."

"…I appreciate that," said Hannibal, a smile in his voice. "If you wouldn't tell Jack, though, why would you want to know?"

"I guess…to understand who I am when I lose myself. What am I capable in these blackouts?" Will looked down to his hands, ashamed to see small tremors. "I lost *hours*. What happens if I lose days? Weeks? Months?"

"Then we must simply retrace your steps."

Will nodded, the let out a short hiss of breath, laughing a little. "I heard you at the cabin – when you spoke with Jack Crawford?" Will glanced up at Hannibal, then to the bookcases. "You were upset with him."

"Eavesdropping, Will?" Hannibal didn't sound upset. Will laughed a little and stood up, pacing the length of the room.

"You were concerned for my mental state seeing things like that, but clearly when I lose time, I have no qualms harming someone else."

"That is an alternate time and an alternate consciousness, and given what's happened, I have every right to be frustrated at Agent Crawford's use of your mind to further his work. We can't say whether or not the graphic depictions of violence you've been subjected to have been the cause of you going into these states that ultimately led to Nicholas Boyle's death," Hannibal said, watching Will pace.

"He's not forcing me," Will said after a beat.

"No, but he's using your empathy as a weapon against you. You want to help people because you can see people the way no one else can. Knowing that you have a disorder, he knows the right things to say to ensure that you not only want to help, but you feel a crippling obligation as though you were the FBI agent, not him."

"Has he tried to talk to you?" Will asked.

"Only to inform me that he has an agent posted to keep Abigail from being harmed. On the mention of you or your mind, he remained silent."

“Do you think hypnosis would help me get those blank spaces back? Will asked, glancing over at him. “You’ve been trying that with my sleepwalking, and so far that seems to be working –would it help recover lost memories?”

“Do you recall much of our sessions in hypno-therapy?” Hannibal asked curiously.

“No…is that a good sign, or is it a bad sign?”

“You haven’t been sleepwalking, which was our primary goal, but you are losing time elsewhere. I can try to see why, but I can’t make promises, Will.”

“None of this is really a promise, is it?” Will asked with a small laugh. “You’re not a licensed psychiatrist, and as far as anyone knows, we’re just friends having conversations.”

“Until I complete my OD program and residency, that is what it will have to be,” Hannibal agreed. “Even after, though; would you want our relationship dynamic to change?”

Will thought of the way Hannibal had kissed him, his tawny eyes somehow stripping every barrier down until he found the core of what he was searching for. In the midst of his fear, his adrenaline, and his horror, Hannibal had managed to find the sole piece that was something different, something not so tainted. He drummed his fingers on his pant leg, and he shook his head.

“I like our relationship as it is,” he decided, and Hannibal nodded with a small, crafty smile.

“As do I.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for all of your love and support of this fic! I'm having so much fun writing this!! Things should go back to our regularly scheduled updates of 5-6 days between chapters rather than a sporadic mess :)

Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 21:

Beverly called his house Friday evening, and Charlie answered.

"Will? Oh, yes, he's here. What's your name? Beverly? One second, Beverly," Charlie said, and he passed the phone to Will with a sly smile. "It's a girl," he said conspiratorially. From the couch, Bill Graham looked over to witness the crowning moment of Will taking a call from a girl.

"Hello?" he said, turning away from his audience.

"Is that your dad? He sounds hot."

"Beverly," Will groused.

"The one and only. What are you doing tonight?"

"I'm almost caught up on all of my homework," he said, walking into the kitchen. He leaned against the counter and tried to ignore the obvious craning of his father's head around the couch.

"Boring. I got an in for a college party happening in the city –you should come."

"…That may require me to be sociable," said Will.

"And? Come on, let me help you get some stuff off of your mind, lumberjack." She said his sad excuse for a nickname affectionately.

"I don't think *you'd* want me there. I'm…I'm not good with that sort of thing."

"Let me be the judge of that, 'kay? Come on, if you don't show up to my house I'm calling in a missing person's report on you."

Will shook his head, dismayed, but he agreed that the better choice was to go with her. After grabbing directions to her house, he hung up the phone and grabbed his keys and wallet, scratching Winston's head as he headed towards the door.

"Where are you going?" his father asked, muting the TV. Will paused at the door, glancing from it to Bill to Charlie.

"I'm meeting my friend for dinner," he said.

"Just a friend?" Charlie asked with a grin.

“Did you think to ask?” Bill Graham inquired. Will frowned, looking back to his father on the couch.

“No,” said Will with a curt shrug.

“Are you going to now?” his father asked, sitting up. Behind him, Charlie shifted his weight and frowned down at Bill.

“I guess I didn’t see why I had to ask permission to a man that’s so far in debt to someone else that they’re living with us until you can pay them back,” Will said, and he shut the door behind himself. He heard his father curse, shout, and there was the sound of something hitting the wall, but he didn’t let that stop him. Within seconds he was pulling away from the house and heading towards Beverly’s, and within the hour they were well on their way to the city so that she could show him how the ‘other kids’ relaxed.

“You didn’t think to dress up?” Beverly asked as she parallel parked on a side-street. She was dressed to kill, as her sister had informed Will, with a leather jacket, heeled boots, and pants that appeared almost painted on. There was a current of energy in her as she hopped out of car, something electric and wild. It made Will’s skin itch. He glanced down at his khakis and plaid, and he shrugged.

“This is my nice shirt,” he said. The other nice shirt he’d worn to two funerals, and he didn’t feel like ever wearing it again.

“You do have that cute, boy-next-door look. The chicks will dig it,” she said, heading down the sidewalk. In the distance, he heard the unmistakable sounds of far too many speakers loaded into a small space, the night air permeated with a fast-paced melody.

“I don’t know if I want any chicks digging it,” he said.

“Or boys, no big deal,” she said with a shrug. Will thought about correcting her –he didn’t want *anyone* digging him –but he thought of Hannibal, and he shook his head, not bothering to reply. He wouldn’t find Hannibal at a party like this; that much he knew.

They were let into the house by a man with impressive sleeves of tattoos, and Beverly was accosted by a small group of girls that let out wildly excited screams of delight. To be fair, she seemed equally as dismayed by the screaming; she gave Will an apologetic glance and quickly introduced him to faces whose names blurred together. The air reeked of beer, sweat, sex, and weed, and when too many bodies pressed close, he urged Beverly to help him find a corner.

“I love this DJ!” Beverly shouted to him, handing him a beer. Will popped the tab and all but chugged it down, ignoring the acrid taste in favor of the alcohol that would help him relax. Faces meshed, blended, until all he could see were mouths, jaws, hair, and bits of flesh. One of Beverly’s friends grabbed his arm to pull him to the dancefloor, but he jerked from her hold and shook his head curtly, holding the beer up as an excuse. Too drunk, too distracted, and she was swept onto the floor by Beverly who declared that it was her favorite song.

Will stared at the churning mass of bodies and took another prolonged gulp. He had the genuine feeling that it was going to be a long night.

Two hours later found Will in the same place, decidedly drunker than before. He was on his sixth beer, and things were decidedly less tense, decidedly less anxious. He swayed in his spot, surrounded by two girls and three guys, and he wondered vaguely just who in the world they were. Beverly was still raging strong on the dancefloor, and she periodically broke away to check up on Will before she was at it again, moving to the syncopated beat.

"Right? Like Will was saying, it's just not…right? Yeah," one of the guys said, motioning towards Will. Will lifted his beer can, as if to agree, although there was something in the back of his mind that said he'd never even spoken for someone to agree with. Rather than point it out, though, he smiled, studying the shoes in their semi-circle.

"Yeah, yeah! Like, I didn't even do anything wrong, I was just talking, and now I'm single and I didn't even cheat! It's so wrong, *so* wrong," one of the girls said, and she gestured wildly, almost spilling her drink. Will opened his mouth to warn her about how dirty the floor would be if she spilled her drink, but his tongue was heavy and his lips had an odd, numbed pressure to them. His mouth snapped shut, and he nodded.

"You'll find someone way better," the other girl said, and she leaned against Will, giggling. "Like maybe Will could make you forget about him? He's cuter."

"You are much cuter," the first girl agreed, and she stared at Will, the oddest of expressions on her face. It took a moment for the words to register, and when they did, he took another long pull from his drink, wondering how to gently explain that he wasn't someone she'd want to get tangled with.

How did one kindly broach the subject of murder at a college party?

"Will?" He was saved from having to explain himself. Will looked away from the expectant group, and when he saw Alana Bloom, a wide, wild smile crawled across his mouth. The room swooped and swayed, but she stayed steady as she broke through his newfound group of friends.

"Alana," he said, and he let out a tangible sigh. "It's good to see you."

"What are you doing here?" she asked, and her eyes cut to the onlookers that watched curiously. "Do you know these people?"

"No," said Will cheerfully.

"Is that beer?" she asked.

"No," he lied.

"Sorry, excuse us," she apologized to the onlookers, and she grabbed his arm, tugging him through the crowd. If it'd been anyone else, he'd have fought it, but his steps were hardly his own, and he all but glided after her, an odd, fuzzy elation in his lungs as he breathed. He

waved towards the small posse of people he'd somehow become attached to, and when Alana found the door to the balcony, he followed. She shut the door behind them, cutting out most of the sound, and she let him stumble into the railing where he held on tightly.

"Why do you have a beer?" she asked.

"It's the only way I can be here with so many people," he said with an exaggerated 'duh' in his tone. "Otherwise I'd probably have a panic attack in the middle of the room." Normally such a confession would have appalled him, but his mouth tingled, and a halo of light from the bulb above them made an angel out of her.

"You're not twenty-one," she said.

"Neither is the friend that brought me here," he said, gesturing towards the door. "She's dancing."

"How much have you had to drink?" she asked.

"Too much," Will replied without hesitation. He finished the can in his hand. "Far, far too much."

"How do you feel?"

"Decidedly drunk. Numb. I think that's why she brought me. She wanted me to get a load off of something." What needed a load? What was loaded but needed to not? He found he didn't even want to recall.

"How's that working out for you?" Alana inquired. There was a sliver of snark in her voice, and Will found it delightful.

"There is complete disconnect between my mind and logical emotion. Right now, it's mighty nice."

"I don't condone this," Alana said firmly.

"I knew you wouldn't. But…what's this place doing in a girl like you?" He paused, puzzled. That wasn't right. "What's…what's…what are you doing here?" he finally corrected.

"I was invited," Alana said, and underneath her disappointment, a small smile quirked her lips.

"So was I," he said.

"Not legally, though," she pointed out.

"Are you going to rat on us?"

"Thought about it," she replied.

“The verdict, Miss Bloom?” he prompted.

“After everything that’s happened to you, Will…I think a MIP won’t help in the least. I think it won’t fix any of your problems, but merely make more.” He nodded in agreement, and he plucked at the pull tab on the can, fingertips cold but the rest of him oh-so-warm.

“Thanks,” he said quietly.

“For the record, though, I don’t condone you self-medicating with alcohol and college parties,” Alana tacked on with a short laugh.

“I do maintain that I was threatened with a missing person’s report if I didn’t come with her. This therapy was prescribed by a friend.”

“Friends don’t always make the best therapists,” Alana replied, and Will shook his head. Hannibal was his friend, and Hannibal was also his therapist. Was that not right? It felt right; in the months he’d known Hannibal, it’d been the rightest part of his life, up until the point he’d killed someone. Even then, Hannibal had kissed it better. Hannibal had kissed him.

Maybe they weren’t just friends. Friends didn’t just kiss friends.

“I need fixed,” he said quietly. Alana was right.

“What about you needs fixed?” she asked lightly. She walked over beside him and leaned against the railing with him, arms folded against the chilly night air. He had the sudden impulse to wrap his arms around her, but he held back.

“A lot of things…most things. Could you fix *me*?” he asked, looking over at her. Underneath the porchlight, a streak of light made the stars reflect in her eyes, pools of cerulean. He stared at them, unable to fathom how pretty eyes could be. Most times, blue eyes were just blue, but when someone was special to you, they became something more.

“How would I do that?” she asked teasingly. He noted the lack of smile; the tone was right, but the face was wrong.

“Make everything just…stop for a moment. When I’m around you…things just stop for a while. I need that.”

“I see; you have a crush on me?” There was the smile. He reached up and lightly touched it, her breath warm against his palm.

“I did,” he confessed, and he stared at her lips. “Then I thought, ah…but you’d ruin her, too.”

“Do you think that you ruin everyone you come in contact with?” she asked quietly, unmoving.

“I have a way of ruining things that are beautiful. Really, I think I liked you because with everything that’s happened, you are the one thing that seems completely and utterly

normal," he replied. Her mouth closed, pursed, and he dragged his thumb over her bottom lip as gently as he could.

"You're too young for me," she said kindly, and he nodded. He swooped in and pressed a quick, light kiss to her lips, then pulled away and stared up at the sky, turning the empty can around and around and around in his hands.

"I won't do that again," he promised, and Alana laughed, looking up at the sky with him. "Like I said, I *did*. The moment passed, and now I see you as a friend of sorts. My one normal friend."

"If you were older, I'd date you," she said, and Will shook his head.

"No you wouldn't."

"And why is that?"

"I highly doubt you'd allow yourself to enter into a relationship with someone that was mentally unstable." The truth was a funny thing when you were drunk. He said it so blasé, the warning bells in his head ringing but muffled, distorted. He knew it was wrong to say, to share in the frigid cold air, but he did it anyway. He wondered what it'd feel like to kiss Hannibal in a state like this. Would he have allowed it? Would he have cared? If he had a cell phone, he'd have called to ask. He'd kissed a girl. He felt bold, daring.

He felt utterly out of his mind.

"Do you feel unstable, Will?" she asked.

"Oh, yes," he replied airily. "Very much."

She held his hand, and without thinking he held on tightly, as though she were the only thing in the world keeping him from drifting away.

-

He woke up face-first in feather down pillows. The blankets around him were warm, the air was cool, and as he inhaled deeply, there was an oaky, forest scent of expensive cologne just at the tip of his tongue. There was a genuine feeling of comfort, of warm fires and a cozy, alluring sense of laziness that permeated his bones and whispered to him that if he could, he should stay like this forever.

This was most certainly not his room.

He bolted up, then hissed and grabbed his head tightly, a ricocheting pain circling his skull with a delightful vengeance. As one, flashes of images, sounds, voices, and mouths lanced across his vision, and he found himself having to close his eyes before he retched up whatever awful drink he'd consumed the night before.

Not drink. Drinks. Plural.

He swore, and he shifted out of the bed, sliding onto the cool hardwood floor. Beside his feet, his pants lay discarded, and when he trusted himself to bend down, he slid them on and looked around, eyes squinting at the cheerful sunlight that peeked through the window. The room was classical, a four-poster bed, rich mahogany furniture, and daring wine colored walls. An odd instrument sat in the corner, and after a long, hard stare at it, Will realized just exactly what it was, and whose room he was currently standing in.

If he had a hole nearby, he'd happily bury himself in it.

He found the master bathroom, all marbled countertops with a sleek, black bathtub, and he stared at himself in the mirror, expecting the worst. Despite feeling as though an anvil had been dropped on his head, he didn't look too different than his normal, haggard self. The shadows under his eyes were still pronounced, his hair was still mussed and incorrigible, and his five o'clock shadow was a couple of days old now. He looked tired. He looked a tad unhinged. Was his skin clammy? Behind him, Nicholas Boyle watched with a terrified expression, and he turned on a faucet, splashing frigid cold water on his face to make him go away. When he straightened, it was Garrett Jacob Hobbs instead.

"No worse than I look," he said, mouth black with decay.

Will walked out of the master bedroom and padded down the familiar hallway, stopping to see if Hannibal was in the study. The light was on, but no one was inside, and Will looked about, scratching his arm idly. There was a cup of what appeared to be coffee at the desk, still half-full, and a small series of sketching paper lay across in an organized chaos. A scalpel and a drawing pencil sat to the side, and Will circled the desk to take a look, thinking of the last drawing he'd seen. What else inspired Hannibal? What else moved him to create such vivid images?

He stared down at a drawing of himself. Then another. Then another.

He flipped through the sketches, but they were all of him. In some he stood, back turned as he stared out of a window. In some he sat, hands pressed to his eyes as he recounted what terrible dreams had slithered into the real world from his mind. In one, he lay half-sprawled across what appeared to be the bottom of a hospital bed, and in another he stared back at the viewer with a steady, resigned expression. He flipped through them to the last one, and he stared at what could only be considered a real, genuine smile. His head was tilted, his eyes downcast. Hannibal's fine lines managed to capture the way his eyelashes curled, the faint lines around his eyes that crinkled with the emotion. When had he laughed like this? When had Hannibal witnessed it and decided that it should be immortalized on paper? The curves were romantic, delicate. The way his lip curled was precise, purposeful. Will paused, fingertips just above the line of his cheek, and he exhaled shakily.

If someone told him that he was such an inspiration to someone like Hannibal, he'd have never believed them. Not in a thousand years.

"Good morning," Hannibal said, and Will leapt away from the desk as though he'd been burned by it. His head throbbed, and he reached up to cradle it until the aching passed. In that time, Hannibal casually crossed the distance between them and circled the desk, glancing down to see what Will had nosily barged into. His face gave no change as he

realized he'd been caught, although his hand flexed and curled lightly. He looked from the drawing to Will, and his lip quirked into a smile.

"You caught me," Hannibal said lightly.

"How…how did I get here?" Will asked, purposefully not drawing attention to the stack of papers that Hannibal's hand rested on. He swallowed thickly and took a half-step back, guilty.

"Alana Bloom felt it best that you have a safe place in town to rest. Your friend, Beverly Katz, she informed me, is just down the hall in the room you normally rest in." Hannibal's fingers glided along the paper before he turned and picked up his coffee cup, taking a sip.

"I'm sorry," he said quickly. "We didn't mean to disturb anyone, we-"

"It's quite alright. I was happy to lend a hand to a friend in need." Hannibal smiled, a playful turn to his lips. "And you did appear to be in genuine need."

"Oh god," Will groaned, and he pressed a palm to his temple as his head throbbed in agreement. "I apologize for whatever I said or did…I was not myself."

"You most certainly weren't," Hannibal laughed. He walked over to the carafe and poured a glass of water for Will, handing it over when he reached him once more. "You were insistent that we share a bed because your friend had your normal guest room."

"I –what?" Will felt his neck grow hot, then spread to his ears. This wasn't happening. This wasn't happening; perhaps if he repeated it enough, he'd believe it.

This isn't real.

"You informed me that it was crucial for human survival to share body heat, and that you were far too cold to sleep alone. I could hardly argue that logic."

"Then, we…?" he croaked.

"I laid on top of the comforter, and you slept underneath. I thought it the perfect solution without taking advantage of your inebriated state. After you fell asleep, I slept on the couch." He had a small, devastatingly charming smile flitting about the edges of his mouth, and Will took a sip of water, setting it down to rub his face.

Idiot, idiot, idiot…

"I'm…quite frankly, embarrassed," he said after he found the right words. "I'm so sorry I put you out like that."

"I was relieved, in truth," Hannibal said, taking a step closer. Self-consciously, Will took a step back.

"Relieved?" he asked, glancing to the drawings.

“Yes. When Alana called me, I was concerned for your safety, as well as your mental state. You put yourself in a fairly vulnerable position, Will.” Hannibal took another step, and Will found his back pressed against one of the columns in the room, his eyes fixated.

“It wasn’t intentional,” he replied, and Hannibal stepped closer, unheeding of Will’s inability to move away from him. His wing-tipped dress shoes paused just before Will’s dockers, and he stared down at him intently.

“I should hope not. What if you had gotten alcohol poisoning? What if you had said something compromising about yourself?

Do you feel mentally unstable?

Oh, yes. Very much.

“I was feeling mildly panicked about the number of people in the room that were all staring at me,” he said lamely, and when Hannibal leaned in, his breath caught.

“How do you feel now that I’m staring at you?” he asked lightly. It was an innocent question; Will should have been able to answer with something simple and direct. The close proximity of his skin, his scent, and his arresting gaze was dizzying, though. Will’s breath hitched, and his lips parted, wanting.

What would it feel like to kiss Hannibal?

“Honestly?” he asked quietly, eyes falling to Hannibal’s mouth.

“Honestly,” Hannibal replied.

“Hungry,” he murmured, and Hannibal closed the distance between them. Will’s fingers fumbled over the soft, smooth fibers of his sweater, gliding across broad, capable shoulders so that he could wrap his arms around him, drawing him closer. Hannibal let out a low, primal growl in the back of his throat, and his hands slid along his jaw to reach up and grip his curls, fingers tangling in them. It was possessive. It was rash. Will bit his bottom lip, and Hannibal’s answer was all teeth, a snarling grin as he pressed Will’s back against the column, aligning his body to his from hip to chest.

Hannibal broke the kiss, and Will let out a gasp of breath as he pressed hot, needing kisses to his skin, nose gliding past the juncture of his jaw to his neck. He bit right at the pulse hammering against Will’s throat, and his knees almost buckled, a white-hot pleasure racing down his spine. He drew Hannibal closer, wanting, needing. Hannibal kissed down to the place where the top of his shirt met his collarbone, and he dragged his teeth along his skin, pausing to press his forehead to Will’s chest. His breath came short, choppy. Will dug his fingers into his back, and he stared up at the ceiling, seeing but not quite seeing.

Deliberately, Hannibal slid his hands from Wills hair and trailed his fingers along his shoulders, following the seams of his shirt until he reached Will’s hands. Lifting his head to stare into Will’s eyes, he interlaced their hands and lifted them up until he had Will pinned in

place, arms arched above his head. His chest pressed to Will's, and their heavy breathing slowly grew in sync.

"I don't know what I'd do if something happened to you," Hannibal said slowly. "I think of you putting yourself in such a position as you did last night, and all that I can ask myself is how I will ever thank Alana Bloom for being there."

"I didn't mean to worry you," Will said quietly. He thought of the drawings on the desk not ten feet from them, and he smiled slightly. "I wasn't aware that you held me in such high regard."

"Make no mistake, Will Graham," he said, lowering Will's arms so that he could press a kiss to each palm. "On that subject, I hold you in the highest esteem."

-

Beverly woke up in time to vomit into the guest bathroom toilet. Will heard the cursing and sound of the toilet flushing from the office where he sat by the window to watch the early morning walkers, and he exchanged a knowing glance with Hannibal.

"Breakfast," Hannibal declared, and he excused himself to prepare it. When it was ready, Will sat across from her at the breakfast table, and he feared that she would be able to see the burnt flesh where Hannibal's lips had touched. Thankfully, her hangover was worse than the splitting headache that he was currently sporting. She stared down at her meal with dead, pathetic eyes, and it wasn't until after she choked down the eggs that she stared to appear vaguely humanlike.

"I'm so sorry," she said to Hannibal, unable to accept the orange juice he offered her. "I normally make a better first impression."

"It's quite alright, Miss Katz. A friend of Will's is a friend of mine." Hannibal poured Will another glass, then set the pitcher down. "You were quite intent on being friends earlier this morning."

"That's me; friendly to the end." She morosely took a bite of food, and she eyed Will suspiciously across the table.

"What?"

"Who was the girl that dropped us off here? Ally? Annie?"

"Alana," Will replied, taking a bite of sausage.

"She's a mutual friend of ours," Hannibal said. Beverly let out a pained snicker of laughter.

"Looked more than friendly to me," she said pointedly to Will. Will shrugged.

"You also thought that the fire hydrant nearby was a dog," he replied. That stopped her laughter mid-breath. She shifted in her seat and took another nibble of her food, opting

for the toast instead.

"Beer before liquor, never sicker," she intoned to herself.

Hannibal took them to Beverly's car where she thanked him profusely, promising to reimburse his gas. Hannibal waved off the promises and left them in the mid-morning chill of a gorgeous Saturday, and it wasn't until he turned the corner that Beverly doubled over and lost her breakfast across the pavement.

Will, whose mouth had been better occupied than hers, didn't have the grace to not laugh.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for your responses/surprise! I loved reading the utmost shock of Hannibal kissing someone over a corpse. Definitely a pretty dark picture :)

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 22:

He spent the night at Abigail's hospital, much to their chagrin. While there weren't exactly any rules expressly forbidding it, the idea of a boy lurking around a female patient's room while she was trying to mentally heal sat with them like a thorn that'd slipped into their shoe. Try as they might, they couldn't quite pull it out to be alright with the situation. It wasn't until he promised to coax her into going to her group therapy sessions that they allowed it, seeing as how he seemed to have far better 'sway' with her than they did.

"She fights us on it," Nurse Stunpike said, leading him down the hall. "She says it doesn't help her, and we've found her missing from the institute four times now."

"Missing?" Will asked. Despite being in the position of 'the up-and-up' as Beverly called it, when a patient in the hallway over screamed in mortal terror, the hair on the back of his neck rose up. Nurse Stunpike didn't even seem to hear it.

"She went to Mr. Lecter's house, according to her. He was the one that brought her back, so I can only assume that's true. Either way, she resists her therapy, and she makes little jail breaks for fun."

Will doubted that it was for fun. When he walked into her room, she sat poised at the couch, like she was expecting them. Nurse Stunpike went over the rules and regulations of guests that stayed overnight –mostly a listing of a genuine 'no intimacy' policy –before she handed Will a starched blanket and a scratchy pillow for the couch.

"They must like you to let you do this," Abigail said, putting her book to the side. Her smile was small, hesitant.

"I hadn't realized you had a habit of climbing the fence. When I implied you'd find a way to have a slumber party with me no matter what, they figured it'd be easier if they could just monitor you here," he said, setting his things down on one of the end tables.

"Oh…they told you?"

"Why are you going to Hannibal's?" he asked. She scooted to the side to give him room to sit down.

"Does that bother you?"

"No…he's my friend. I'm just curious why you'd risk sneaking out to see him when he comes here frequently." With no one else in the room, Will saw the sly, manipulative parts

of her face come alive with a gaze that cut to the side and a smile that grew to a smirk. She looked down and slid her palms along the dark wash jeans Alana had bought her.

"He knows, Will," she finally declared, and she reached up to touch the scarf at her neck.

It was damning in its ambiguity. Will stared at the crack in the tile floor, and it felt like it would grow to a chasm to swallow him up. He shook his head, a hollow ringing in his ears.

"How does he know?" he asked, voice rough and grated.

"He was on the phone that night since you called him. I asked him why he kept visiting me, and he said that he felt a deep, personal responsibility for my well-being. He said…h-he said he heard you accuse us both, and I didn't deny it." She gulped, cradling her neck like a fragile, small bird. "So I told him. He asked me if you knew, and I said yes, and he said he'd keep our secret."

"He does that," Will replied haggardly, reeling.

"He's going to, right? He's not…he's not going to tell that agent that visited me?"

"Agent Crawford?"

"Yes. He came here and kept asking me if I knew about my father…he said Nicholas Boyle went missing, and he knows I climbed the hospital wall." She buried her face in her hands at that, shoulders trembling with the effort to hold back tears. If he'd been before anyone else, he'd have suspected her of playing one of her survival games, but alone he could hear the genuine terror. Should he tell her what happened to Nicholas Boyle? Should he give her his secret to balance him holding on to her?

"I guess…that's why I came here tonight," he said slowly, placing a hand lightly on her back.

"What?" She turned her head to look at him.

"I'm worried about Nicholas Boyle, too. I had to see you and reassure myself that he wasn't going to get to you."

"Do you think he went on the run?"

"I think that whatever happened to him, he knows he can't get to you now," said Will, and as he met Abigail's gaze, she saw what she needed to see. Her breath caught, and she nodded, looking back down to the hospital floor. An almost imperceptible smile graced her face, but Will was somewhat versed in searching for the Abigail that no one else seemed to be able to see. Without having to say a word, he knew that she knew exactly what he'd done, the same way he knew better than anyone else that she was as good a lure as a hunter.

"Thank you, Will," she said.

Will looked across the room where Nicholas Boyle watched, a haunted, longing expression in his eyes.

"I'd do anything to keep you safe," he said, and Nicholas nodded in agreement.

-

Charlie went fishing with him Sunday, although Will tried to protest. Normally he only fished with his dad, but Charlie reasoned that his dad was gone, and he'd only indulged a few times. They found themselves out on the rocks by the river, studying the many lures they'd made over the years. Between the two of them, quite a few spanned their small workplace, and they were able to take their pick, fingers passing reverently along the fine threads and feathers. Charlie turned one over in his hand, and he gave a low whistle of appreciation.

"This is some fancy stuff," he said, handing it to Will. Will began the process of threading and attaching it, a pleased smile on his face.

"My dad taught me when I was young."

"Bill Graham taught you that?" Charlie asked in disbelief.

"Not the Bill Graham you know." Will's smile dropped, fell flat in the water where it was carried away by the steady current. Overhead, the sky was lovely, not a cloud in sight, and the leaves that were left on the trees fell in droves with each cold breeze that called to them. Their nakedness was a small comfort to Will, the one shred of honesty that seemed to surround him these days. No matter the chaos that he was surrounded in, nature would follow its course with or without him. There was something comforting in that sense of organization, of a world that continued with or without him. Time stopped for no one.

"How many Bill Grahams exist?"

"As many as places we've moved to," said Will, and he stood, casting his line. Charlie frowned down at the tackle box, like it had somehow wronged him.

"He does wear a person mask," he said, standing up. He'd chosen another lure, one flashier that'd taken far longer to make. Will could remember steadier hands that'd made that, hands without alcohol, hands without bitterness. That Bill Graham had taken him fishing at least twice a week, and they'd eaten like kings.

"I think a lot of people do."

"You don't," Charlie pointed out.

"That's because I grew up with one and didn't like how it looked. You've lived here for a while…you can imagine. He wears them to blend into the crowd."

"He told me you aren't interested enough in people to care about blending in or making friends. He said you're about as socially inept as a potato."

“He’s not wrong,” Will affirmed.

“You know, I’m a little relieved he couldn’t pay me straight away,” Charlie confessed, and Will laughed again, this one almost sincere. “I mean it. He’s almost starving you with those TV dinner trays, and you’re going to get cancer, you know. You’re not supposed to eat that much out of a microwave.” Will laughed at that, the kind of laugh that scraped on the way out.

“Is he still mad at me?”

“He swore for a bit, then decided it wasn’t worth it. He told me he knew you’d leave him in the end because that’s what your mom did.” Will hunkered down, an instinctual move. Words about mother were dangerous. His dad wielded them like a clumsy scalpel, too many beers deep to make a clean line.

“And there it is; the inevitable reaction to a woman you don’t even remember.” Charlie’s voice softened. “Did he teach you to feel sorry for carrying half of her genetics?”

“No.”

“Not directly, I imagine. I’ve always wondered what it was like for the one that kept the child. Everyone talks about the one that left, but do they care about the kid? Does the parent that kept the child affirm them? Do they punish them? Do they teach them to hate the one that left? Do they teach them to hate themselves?”

A fish distracted him from replying. It tugged on his line lazily, then insistent. Will shifted, then reeled and turned slightly, a small smile on his face at the resistance, the protest. Fish didn’t like to fight for their food; they wanted it nice and easy. They weren’t used to the idea of it getting away, and when it was too late, they couldn’t spit out the hook in time. He banked on this, planned on their not realizing the end until it was too late. Charlie noted the expression of concentration on his face, and he grabbed the net to scoop it up in time so that it couldn’t get away.

“Nicely done, nice…yeah, just like that,” he said, and when it came flying out of the water, he caught it in the net and swung it towards them, laughing. “Perfect!”

It was good sized, a rainbow trout whose scales shimmered in the sunlight with ethereal opalescence. Will laughed a little at the catch, at the ease. Abigail may have been the hunter, but Will was patient enough to catch whatever it was that he desired. He didn’t need a gun to do that. Charlie removed the hook and took the fish from him, grinning as though he’d caught it himself.

“That’s a good sized one, Will. I’ll make a seared fish with lemon tonight,” he declared, and he strung it up on their small line where two others rested.

“Did your wife and kid walk out on you, so you see me as the chance to recreate something you never got to have?” Will asked, watching him with the fish. Charlie dipped his head and grimaced, a grave and solemn turn to his shoulders. To almost anyone else, the question would have been rude. He heard Miss Avery in his head discussing the personal

boundaries of pasts best left unsaid, but she was dead and couldn't open her mouth to scold him.

"Right on the mark," Charlie said. "Don't get me wrong –you're not my kid. I'm not trying to recreate anything. I lost something great, and when I see someone else that took for granted what I'd kill to have…"

"You take them fishing," Will finished when he couldn't.

"I take them fishing," Charlie agreed.

-

I sit on the park bench with Miss Avery, and she feeds the birds. She has long since begun decomposition, her grin the product of missing skin rather than true happiness. Rotting flesh tosses bread crumbs to pigeons, mechanical and uncaring. I watch the motion, both at peace and disgusted.

"Do you condemn Jared Freeman now that you know how it feels to kill for love?" she asks, and I am Will Graham. I am the product of rage, of fear. I am the product of passion, of an instinct that acted when I could not. Jared Freeman would be proud.

"I didn't kill the one that I loved; I killed the one that would kill her."

"How many lives are worth hers? First her father, now Nick Boyle. If another comes for her life, will they too perish at your hand?" Her voice is rocks against flint, sparking accusations that sting and burn.

"Yes," I say without hesitation.

"You're tied with Jared Freeman. What will you do when your body count surpasses his?"

"Nothing."

"Will you still think he is a monster for what he did to me?" she asks, and I blanch. Blood mushrooms and explodes in the air, and she is collapsing, falling to the floor with the sort of sound that a living person can't make. I blink again, and skeletal, claw-like hands scatter bits of skin and meat down to the pigeons below.

"Yes."

"Hannibal kept your secret. Is he a monster, too?"

"No."

"He's keeping Abigail's secret. Is she a monster?"

"No."

“Is your mercy only extended to a select few? Even in understanding, you only relish in the feeling of his kills, not the acceptance of viewing such a thing and knowing why?”

“You’ve grown colder and far more calculating since your murder, Miss Avery,” I say, hollow.

“So have you, judging by the number of bodies that now surround you,” she replies, and blood spatters the front of her ruined blouse as she laughs. “You steal kisses with a man far older than you, and you hide bodies to avoid the punishment you know that you deserve. You justify your actions, but in the end, you’re just like me. Cold. Dead. Decaying from the inside out.”

The ravenstag appears before us, a dark, terrible aura surrounding it as it lets out a sharp, piercing cry. Miss Avery drops the small bag of human remains and screams, hands clasped to a head that held no ears or hair. The stag charges, head lowered, and it impales her on its mighty horns, lifting her above us with a vengeance that makes me fall to my knees. It is dark; it is awe-full. Her mouth parts in a silent scream, and as she exhales, dust billows from her, disintegrating until nothing but sand is scattered to the wind, carrying what little of her is left. Like tendrils of ribbons she is undone, and I reach up to catch a small piece. I miss, and before I know it there is nothing between me and the stag, its oil-spill eyes centered on me and me alone.

I think to plead, I think to bargain. Perhaps this is my reckoning, and I am to be made undone as she was, as though she never were. There is no rest for the wicked, unless the wicked are unmade. I am surprised, though, as the stag lowers its head and gives deference to me, naming me its king, naming me its keeper.

“Will?” Will blinked, pulled from his thoughts as one pulled a shoe from the mud; first, blind resistance, than all at once with a force that threw you to your back. He fell into the river with a wild, imbalanced splash, and he gasped at the sheer cold of it. Hastily, he stood and looked about, the sun fast setting over the line of trees, blinking droplets of water from his lashes.

“Are you alright?” Hannibal asked from the shore. Will looked over at him, his impeccable suit jarring against the backdrop of Will’s rundown yellow house. Slowly, carefully, Will traversed the rocks and sticks in the river, water sluicing about him and threatening to pull him under once more. He was soaked from the chest down, and as a teasing wind carried across the water, it sent a chill down his spine.

“I have a twenty-four hour cancellation policy, Will,” Hannibal said, reaching a hand out to help him to shore. Will grasped it and climbed up, teeth chattering. His shoes slipped on the slick ground, and he clambered to safer ground. The dockers squelched and squeaked, and water ran out from the leather.

“I was asleep,” he said when he gained proper footing, refusing to draw attention to how dangerous it was to sleepwalk into a river.

“Your eyes were open,” Hannibal replied, and Will blanched. Still in the river, the stag watched him with glittering eyes, head ducked as though he were prepared to charge.

“I lost time,” he murmured, watching the stag. Hannibal turned to look back at the river, and if Will hadn’t known better, he’d have sworn Hannibal could see it too.

“How much?” Hannibal asked, looking back to him.

“I…remember two-thirteen P.M.,” said Will, and he shivered again, shoulders hunching in. Down the small incline, the river gurgled, coaxing him to take another dip. Without Hannibal there as a wall between him and the water, he wasn’t so sure he’d resist.

“It’s almost seven o’clock now,” Hannibal said, and he led Will up the bank, trudging towards the house that only had Will’s truck and Hannibal’s car in the driveway. Once inside, he left Will to chew his words over as he showered off the river, the water hot enough that spots of angry flesh dotted along his back, shoulders, and chest.

He found Hannibal in the kitchen, cooking. His apron was tied taut at the waist, as it normally was when he cooked in his own home, and the spread of fresh, pungent vegetables assaulted his nose as he sat down at the table.

“You brought food?”

“I find the state of your kitchen appalling,” Hannibal said, dicing celery. “So I brought food.”

“You knew I’d be here?”

“I called at five-thirty when I heard no word from you. We should look into getting you a cellular device. I believe it was Charlie that told me you’d gone fishing alone, but he had to leave for a meeting in town and didn’t have time to fetch you.” The celery was moved to the side, and a food Will had never even seen was produced and scrubbed in the kitchen sink. He stood up and moved closer to watch, eyes fastened on the short, confident strokes of the knife.

“Those aren’t our kitchen knives.” The look Hannibal tossed his way could have boiled the water that currently resided in the pot on the stove.

“I’ve seen your kitchen before, Will. I came prepared.”

“Did you come prepared to fix me?” he asked jokingly, although the humor fizzled and died before it even left his mouth. Hannibal glanced up from his chopping, and his wrist paused.

“When you manage to sleep, how do you dream?” he asked.

“Poorly.”

“What do you see?” Will turned away and looked out of the small window, teeth worrying over his chapped lips, small indents where he’d broken the skin.

“I…feel like I’m drowning. I dream I’m in an ocean, and the tide is rising up; I inhale, and I’m swallowing water. I see Miss Avery in states of decay, and she’s become something

ugly and indistinguishable. Jared Freeman isn't there anymore because what little there is left of him is inside of me."

"When you wake, what do you feel?"

"Feverish…hot. The amount of times I've had to just…strip my sheets and my clothes is going to ruin our water bill from all the laundry." Hannibal resumed chopping, and he added the vegetables to the mix, gaze downcast.

"I'm becoming increasingly concerned about your well-being. When you're not endangering yourself, your body is sub-consciously endangering you."

"Yeah, I'm well aware of just how unstable I am," Will agreed.

"You told Alana Bloom that you were unstable," Hannibal said. "She asked about my thesis and thinks we're spending too much time together because of it."

"Aren't we?" Will asked. "How is…how's that's coming, by the way? Your theory regarding the so-called power of empathy?"

"So called?"

"Power implies that it is some form of gift or thing that I can use for personal gain. I don't feel powerful at all. I feel like I'm coming apart at the seams with nothing to stich me back together again."

Hannibal nodded, and he shifted the chopping blocks in order to bring the meat out. It looked pre-seasoned; he likely hadn't wanted to pack all of his herbs, let alone risk the inevitability of Will not having them in his pantry. Will moved closer to better watch his work.

"I hope to have my thesis finished by the end of the semester to have it submitted for review. If it passes, it has the potential to attract the eyes of those who have worked in this field far longer than I have," Hannibal informed him. "They may have insights that I don't have, and they will have access to potential medicines that I don't have the ability to prescribe you."

"You think pills will fix me?"

"You keep using the term 'fix' to refer to your problems with reality versus your reality."

"It's getting worse, though. It needs fixed." Will pointed out. He didn't think the average high school student had to fear wondering where they'd wake up the next day.

"Your empathy isn't getting worse, Will. Your ability to cope with what you've seen and experienced is causing delusions and hallucinations, and your mind is struggling to release the stress that is a natural reaction to your experiences."

“You see me getting closer and closer to that ledge, but you still find it in yourself to be intimate with me,” Will said without thinking. The moment the words permeated the air, he regretted them. There was something dangerously exciting about giving voice to the physical advancements Hannibal had done without explanation or reason. Much like prodding the sleeping lion, it was equal parts temptation and recklessness.

Hannibal set the steaks in the waiting pan, and he turned, placing his hands on Will’s shoulders with a controlled deliberation. “Mental illness does not mean that you are somehow barred from receiving the affections of those around you,” he said, sliding a hand up to cup Will’s cheek. His palm was warm, the tips of his fingers sliding into Will’s still damp hair.

“And you just so happen to be one of those people?”

“I should think that’s fairly obvious.” Hannibal’s thumb brushed against his cheek, and Will’s eyes fluttered closed, reveling in the peacefulness that settled into his chest, making air come easy.

“I’ve killed two people,” he whispered.

“With my help, you won’t have to kill anyone else.” His kiss was the briefest of touches, a whisper of lips so soft it made his heart constrict. Will leaned into it, a quiet sigh escaping him.

The sound of a truck pulling into the driveway separated them, and Hannibal returned to his cooking, leaving Will to fend for himself as he attempted nonchalance. He leaned against the counter and watched the door, nodding curtly as his father and Charlie came in together, smelling of machine oil and sweat.

Hannibal made enough for everyone, and the delicate manner in which he presented the meal wasn’t lost on Bill Graham. He sat down at the dining room table and accepted a glass of wine, eyeballing the kitchen activities with a shrewd gaze. When his plate was set before him, he picked up a small leaf and plopped it into his mouth, studying the angles and curves of the meat critically. When he spun the plate in a full circle to see everything in its glory, he let out a delighted laugh.

“So you’re a shrink, and you can make food look pretty and useful,” he said, slapping the table. Charlie accepted his plate with far less noise, his eyes bouncing from person to person thoughtfully.

“I try to be somewhat of a jack of all trades,” Hannibal said, sitting down. Will stared at his own plate in mortification –his father in Wolf Trap wasn’t careful with his words.

“You’re dating someone, aren’t you?” Bill Graham demanded. “That’s got to be it.”

“Not currently, no.” Hannibal’s eyes fluttered towards Will for the briefest of seconds before cutting back to his food. He took a small, precise bite and chewed thoughtfully.

“Someone’s gonna snap you up if you cook like this all the time. Will don’t date,” Bill said, gesturing to him. Across from him, Charlie lifted his wine glass and inhaled the

bouquet, eyes closed. If he was aware or cared for the conversation, it didn't show.

"Don't you?" Hannibal looked at Will curiously.

"Do you date at all, Will?"

"I just…I don't care much."

"Oh yes, I forgot that you don't have a general interest in people."

"…I don't find you that interesting."

"You will."

"I don't," Will said, taking a pointed bite of his food.

"Will wouldn't care of a person stood naked in front of him and told him that the only way to save their life would be to put his hands on them," Bill said, and if it made sense to him, that's all that mattered. Will exchanged a glance with Charlie who sipped the wine, and Charlie nodded.

"Will told us of the great help you've been to him," Charlie said, following his cue.

"Has he?"

"He doesn't tell me," Bill objected. "He don't even go fishing with me anymore, just you." He directed that to Charlie, his grip on his fork somewhat too tight.

"Only a few times," Charlie replied genially. "Did you have any luck today, Will?"

"…Not today." Will shrugged. He dug into food whose taste left him wanting more, head ducked to avoid the possessive stare that Bill Graham held. It must have been difficult to maintain Bill's mask of indifference when he was finally realizing just how much space he'd made for someone else to come along. This time, it wasn't just Bill Graham and Will Graham.

After dinner, his father invited Hannibal to watch the game, but Hannibal declined under the guise of paperwork. He cleaned his pots and pans, sleeves rolled to the elbow, and Will helped him, drying everything and orbiting in his space for as long as he could. When it was all packed into a couple of boxes, he helped Hannibal carry it to the car, closing the door behind them.

"Your father is an interesting man," Hannibal said, setting his things in the trunk. He shifted the boxes around in an order only he knew while Will waited with arms full.

"I'm sorry," Will said without thinking.

"Do you apologize for him often?" Hannibal asked, amused.

"…Yes."

“I see some of him in your physical features, but almost nothing at a mental capacity.”

“You have no idea how much that means to me,” Will said honestly, and Hannibal laughed.

“I see more of you in his friend –Charlie, was it?”

“Charlie?”

“He seems rather keen on you. He watched you intently throughout most of dinner.”

“He knows about some of the things that have happened…he’s concerned for me.” Hannibal accepted the box from Will and frowned, ducking his head down.

“Some?”

“Just the things that have been in the papers. He’s kept the information from my father.”

“So much so that you’ve even granted him touch privileges, which means you hold him in some regard.” Will wasn’t sure how he could tell, but something shifted there. Be it the feel of the air on his skin, or the hum of energy from Hannibal, it made him move back a step, wary.

“Touch privileges?” he asked. Hannibal closed the trunk and turned to observe him.

“He touched your shoulder several times, even in unnecessary moments.”

“I wouldn’t really call it ‘granting’ –it just happens.” There was something in the space between them that tasted bitter, stagnant. Will was aware of just how many flecks of gold surrounded Hannibal’s pupil, the same as he was aware that something wasn’t quite right. He stared at Will with heavy-lidded eyes, and he stepped closer.

“You’ve granted me touch privilege,” he murmured, and his hands brushed against Will’s belt loops, twisting to grip his hips in an almost too tight hold. Will’s breath caught, and he froze.

“That’s a very different definition of touch privilege,” Will said, and one of Hannibal’s hands slid over his stomach and along his chest, pausing just to the center of his chest where he could feel his heartbeat. As Hannibal’s palm flattened against the muscle, it began to pound, equal parts excitement and unease.

“As long as there’s a difference,” he said, and he dipped down to press a possessive, sharp kiss to his lips. Just when Will thought to kiss him back, he was surprised at a sharp tug on his bottom lip, a bite that left his knees weak.

Hannibal left him confused in the driveway, and when he went into his house he fetched Winston and headed to his room, climbing into bed. A few minutes later, Charlie hovered in the doorway, an odd, watery stance as he seemed to shift between walking in and moving away.

“I’d be careful, Will,” Charlie said, and he rocked from one foot to the other.

“Careful?” Will looked up from petting Winston, and he tilted his head slightly, studying Charlie’s grip on the doorway.

“Not trying to be your dad, or anything, but as good as I am at seeing lies, I’m also good at seeing truths,” Charlie revealed, and Will nodded, looking down at his shoe.

“Did you see something you don’t like?”

“I’m sure Hannibal’s been a great help to your counseling, but I’d be careful around that guy,” Charlie said after a moment. “He wasn’t telling any direct lies, but he wasn’t telling all direct truths, either.”

“Isn’t that how we all operate? One big household of half-truths?” Will asked. It was a good redirection, if he was being honest. The secrets Hannibal kept were just as damning for him as they were for Will.

Will you keep our secret?

It’ll be our little secret.

Charlie looked like he had a quick retort for that, but when he opened his mouth, he let out a short curse and shook his head. His grip faltered on the door frame, and he let his arm fall to the side to swing lamely.

“I’d just be careful…that man you call your therapist looked like he was just about two seconds away from devouring you.”

Chapter End Notes

:) Thank you guys so much for encouraging me to keep going! It means a lot!

Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 23:

Something changed.

The first snow of the season fell, and with it came a hunger that Will couldn't name. He sat across from Hannibal, hands pressed to temples ravaged by headaches, but even in Hannibal's most sympathetic moments to his plight, something was off. He felt imbalanced, one foot on the sandbar and the other in the river with no one to pull him up. Throughout the week, he would look up to glance at Hannibal's face just in time to see a pensive, brooding expression shown only in the taut expression just around his eyes. Will would see Garrett Jacob Hobbs behind him with a sneer, and he'd look away again.

Something had fundamentally changed about their relationship, and Will couldn't figure out quite what it was.

Snow brought customers in by the droves, needing snow tires and tune-ups. The line was backed up around the block, and Will relished in the busy weekend that he was met with. Monotonous, methodical work would help him ignore the non-issue that itched someplace he couldn't reach. His job provided some sort of normalcy, a place where no matter how quiet he was, no one cared because there was a job to be done.

He was up under the belly of a car when he heard it –a steady, heavy clomping noise of hooves on cement. He turned his head and tapped his ear on the ground to remove the sound, twisting his shoulder with the wrench to tighten a bolt. With his gaze turned to the side, though, he saw it; a set of hooves graced the side of the car, poised towards him. Once his mind made the connection, they stepped closer with a conscious deliberation, and when it drew abreast the vehicle, it let out a heaving, heavy snort. Will's eyes were fastened to the blood that pooled with each step, the bits of matter that could only be the flesh and bone of its victims.

It lowered its head, and Will stared into the eye of the ravenstag, the pupil blending into the iris with a bleak, terrible darkness. Blood dripped from its jaw, and when it registered him, it let out a piercing, furious scream, turning its body to ram into the car above him, shaking it from its blocks and sending it on top of him where he-

"Will?" Will jolted, blinking the carnage from his eyes. Crouched down beside him, Joel frowned and held a hand out. "You alright?"

"Sorry," he mumbled, and he ignored Joel's hand, choosing to roll out from his place underneath the car by himself. As he stood, Joel stood with him, pleasant face creased. No ravenstag. No blood. It wasn't real.

This isn't real.

"You look feverish," he said.

"A little peckish." Will nodded and looked to the rest of the workers, relieved to see that whatever Joel had witnessed, no one else had been part of.

"I just want to talk to you in my office, if that's alright." Will followed along behind him, and that is when the stares began to pin to his back. By the time they reached the door to the interior of the shop, each one was a brand that seared and broke flesh.

Joel led him into his office and sat down at his chair, idly turning a pen over his fingers as he tried to find the words for whatever it was that he wanted to say. Will shifted nervously, expecting the worst.

"Did I…do something wrong?" he asked. Joel sighed.

"I've got a couple of customers that don't want you working on their cars. When I asked why, it's because they showed me this." Joel turned to his computer and moved the monitor, flashing Will a very familiar website.

Will Graham: To Catch a Killer, it Takes a Killer?

"That's Freddie Lounds' work," Will said heavily. He took his glasses off and tucked them into the pocket of his coveralls.

"I read it…some pretty heavy stuff there. Did you really threaten her?" Joel scrolled through the article, but Will had no desire to see what she'd said. He'd been worried he'd made it worse, and he wasn't wrong.

"She misconstrued what I said. She was trying to force an interview from my friend who was-" He stopped himself, shaking his head. "She's been a snake that's followed me all the way from Georgia."

"Well she's got it out for you," Joel remarked, and he leaned back in his chair, rubbing his chin. "Now, I know you only work weekends, but I do have to ask if you're alright. You're a good kid, and you work without complaint."

"I can handle it," Will promised.

"Our customers can't, though…I smoothed it over, and I think I'll move you to the back of the shop until this blows over with something else –news is like that. Promise me you'll just stay out of her way? People like that like to go for the throat." Will glanced to the article, his eyes grabbing immediately onto, *'When asked if it was true that he could think like a killer, Will Graham assured me that he'd thought often enough about ways he'd murder me,'* and he sighed, rubbing his temples.

"If she goes into any room, I leave it," he said, and Joel nodded.

“That’s what I like to hear. If you get any sicker, I’ll send you home. Take care of that cold.” Will nodded and excused himself from the office, going back to the same car and sliding under it.

He purposefully ignored the fact that he’d had to walk through puddles of blood to get there.

-

Abigail snuck to Will’s house a week later. She’d have made it to his bed if Winston hadn’t woken him with a low, throaty growl. He instantly sat up and reached for his knife –if the dog could see it, it was real. The light from the window revealed her, the moon casting wild shadows and plains of alabaster across her face as she straightened from her crouch and held her hands up.

“I didn’t know you had a dog,” she whispered. Will lowered the knife and flopped back down, reaching over to rub his flank.

“He found me,” he said, and he waved her over. She stepped on his shirt, damp from his night terror earlier, and she gave a start, skirting around it to crawl onto the edge of his bed. Winston inched closer to her, sniffing her hand before giving it a decided lick.

“Did you have a nightmare?” she asked.

“I always have nightmares,” he replied, rubbing Winston’s tail. He slid the knife back onto the nightstand and rubbed his face, dragging his fingers over the damp skin. “They’re going to know you snuck out again.”

“Do you dream about my dad?” she wondered, criss-crossing her legs. Will sat up to observe her better, although he didn’t turn on the lamp. He didn’t want his dad or Charlie finding out just who was crawling through his window this time of night.

“I dream…about a stag,” he said. “And sometimes I dream about a man that looks like a devil.”

“What do they do?”

“The stag just watches me…he is always where I am when I kill, and he watches. Sometimes his steps trail blood that’s not his, and sometimes…he kills things for me.” He sighed, distinctly aware of his bare chest and her layers upon layers of clothes.

“And the devil?” she prompted.

“He has…horns on his head, but not devil horns. They’re like antlers, and every inch of him is black, from his suit to his shoes to his eyes. He watches, and whenever I see someone that’s been hurt because of me, he stands just behind their shoulder.” Winston rolled back to him, and Will rubbed his belly affectionately. “What are your nightmares?”

“I see Marissa…she shows me crime scene photos, and each one is one of the girls my dad hurt. I tell her that I don’t want to see anymore, but then she screams that I’m the one

that killed them. I'm the one that…" Her voice trailed off, and she pulled her knees to her chest, eyes vacant as she relived her terror.

"You didn't," Will said immediately. "And you didn't kill Marissa, either."

"It feels like I did. I got to sit in that cushy, safe place while he hunted for people that cared about me." Nick. She was talking about Nick. Will's gaze flicked over her shoulder where Nicholas Boyle stood, and he wondered what she'd do if he told her to look.

"It's not really that safe if you're able to sneak in and out so easily," he pointed out wryly. "Maybe I should try it."

"I can't sleep there, Will," she said, inching closer to him. She grabbed his hand, and he forced himself not to pull away. "I can't…sleep there."

"You need to sleep in your own bed," he said.

"I can't sleep in my own bed; I can't even go home! I just can't be there…I can't see those things and wake up alone." Her voice softened, and the terror rested just on the edge of her lips. Will delicately pulled his hand away to rub his face, and he nodded curtly, once.

"I can't say that I'll be much help…my dreams are so real they don't remain dreams," he mumbled. When Abigail didn't say anything else, he went out to the linen closet, fetching another blanket and returning, closing the door behind him as carefully as possible. The house naturally creaked and groaned, and its noises didn't give him away.

They lay back to back with Winston sprawled over their legs, and he decided that it was aptly fitting that Abigail could only find comfort in the bed of a person that killed the man whose only crime was wanting to eat her. It was only when her breathing deepened that he was able to fall asleep.

-

At the suggestion from Hannibal, Will procured for himself a phone –it was nothing fancy, a flip phone that'd cost him ten dollars outright to buy. Unlimited talk, unlimited text, and waterproofing up to 5 meters was the best that it could boast, but it was a luxury Will had never had before. He walked out of the small cell phone mart in the city and met up with Beverly, holding it out for her scrutiny.

"Oh, yeah, I've seen those before," Beverly said, walking with him down the sidewalk. "Pretty sure on a crime show my mom watches, all of the drug dealers have these. They call them burner phones."

"It's shatter resistant," Will replied, snatching it back from her.

"Yeah, I see you shattering enough phones that you're really going to make good use of that feature." Beverly laughed, then revealed her smart phone, holding it beside his for comparison. "Four of your phones make my phone."

“It’s only thirty bucks a month,” he protested, stuffing it into his shirt pocket. The cold air turned his fingertips stiff, his nose frigid. They hurried into a small coffee shop to warm up, Beverly’s hands stuffed under her armpits.

“Well, when you want an upgrade you just come to me,” she said, and she held her hand up when they reached the counter. “Don’t worry, grandpa; back in your time these only cost a nickel, so I’ll cover the difference.”

Charlie was far more supportive of the new phone, adding his personal cell to it as they swapped out fishing rods on Wednesday. He’d given Will his spare Carhartt coat, and the two of them hunkered over a small gas heater while they braved the cold in order to fish.

“After everything that’s happened to you, I think it’s wise to have a means of contacting someone,” he said, fixing bait to the hook. Will nodded and blinked the dull ache away from behind his eye. The cold helped in numbing the pain, but it didn’t altogether go away.

“My dad still doesn’t know?”

“I’ve kept my word, and he’s kept to his personality,” Charlie replied sagely. “He also didn’t notice the girl sneaking out of your window.” Will would have burned a lurid red if it wasn’t so cold.

“It’s not like that,” he snapped.

“I’m sure,” Charlie agreed, smirking.

“No, really,” he pushed, sniffling vainly before he grabbed a tissue and dabbed his nose. “She’s…the daughter of the Shrike. We’re just…”

“Survivors?” Charlie offered when he didn’t finish. Will nodded.

“We’re more than friends, but it’s…family, not romantic in the least.” He didn’t feel it necessary to add that the idea of romance with Abigail made him gag in the back of his throat. The idea of even courting her seemed tawdry, somehow disrespectful.

“Sometimes, the things you go through with someone bond you for life,” Charlie said, and Will nodded in agreement.

“Remind me why fishing in the cold is a good idea?” Will asked, drawing up the hood so that only his nose poked out.

“That’s when you get the big, meaty fat ones. They’re slower; their metabolism slows, but if you use the right bait then you’ll get some of the best fish in the river.”

“So we freeze our fat off, we might catch a fish that can put it back on us?” Charlie laughed, passing him the line.

“You don’t have any fat to speak of, kid, so I’m doing my best.”

Despite the cold that crawled into his bones and made movements slowed, they managed to catch a few solid fish, enough that Charlie promised to smoke them and make some sort of dip. They got so wrapped up in the cleanup and thawing of their bodies around cups of Swiss Miss that Will didn't realize he was late for his appointment with Hannibal until he was on his way there.

He may not have realized it, but Hannibal certainly had. As Will slunk through the door, he felt rather than saw an impatient buzzing, a raw vigor that radiated from Hannibal as he closed the door behind them with deliberately slow care. Hannibal turned towards him in the hall, and Will felt substantially trapped in a small space.

"I'm sorry that I'm late," he said, unwinding the scarf around his neck.

"Poor driving conditions?" Hannibal asked, accepting his scarf and coat to hang up. From anyone else, it was an innocent question. Since their dinner with his father though, nothing sounded innocent coming from Hannibal. There was an edge, something finely honed and unknowingly lethal until later when one bled out from a seemingly small wound. Will struggled for his words, and for the first time in a long time, he was tempted to lie to him.

"We were fishing, and we had to clean the fish before I came," he said at last, and Hannibal turned around to look at him, expression so placid and smooth that it had to be fake. Will's headache pounded in his eye, *danger, danger, danger*.

"We?"

"Charlie and myself," said Will, looking down the hall towards the stairs. "I lost track of time."

"You lost time, or you lost track of time?" Hannibal asked, voice clipped. "There is a difference."

"I lost track of time," Will repeated, and he clasped his hands behind his back to keep from gesturing wildly. "I'm sorry, it was unbelievably rude of me."

Hannibal considered him, and he reached up to pluck a dead leaf from Will's shirt. Somehow, it'd gotten trapped between his layers of clothing, and it crunched as Hannibal turned and tossed it in the waste bin behind him. He sighed, a mournful note, and he gestured towards the stairs.

"I can smell the fish and the forest on you," he said.

"Is that better than the aftershave?"

"Marginally," Hannibal murmured. He studied Will, and Will had a wild urge to grab onto him and kiss him, anything to wipe away the expression in his eyes as though he'd done something unforgivably wrong. The moment passed though, and he was left with the silence, with a pounding headache and a lump in the back of his throat.

“Oh, Will,” Hannibal said, “what are we going to do with you?”

“It won’t happen again,” Will promised, and as he walked towards the stairs, he had the distinct impression of being on death row.

“No,” Hannibal agreed, hand brushing against the small of his back. It sent small tendrils of pleasure along his skin, lazy arcs that melded with his unease and made a knot curl in his stomach. “I’m sure it won’t.”

-

Charlie didn’t go home Thursday, Friday, Saturday, or Sunday. By Monday, Will suggested that they looked into filing a missing person’s report, but Bill Graham waved it off, eating a Jimmy Dean breakfast sandwich. The change in brands startled Will, although he kept from making a comment. The bright red packaging contrasted against the normal blue, and it made his eyes sting.

“My boss said it’s normal,” he grunted, taking a long pull from his coffee cup. Based off of the smell, Will knew well enough that it wasn’t just coffee in the mug. “He’d been there for months, then suddenly in and out of work, disappearing for weeks, days, hours, you name it.”

“It’s normal?” Will asked.

“Lonny said when he does get his ass back in gear, he’s got needle marks all up and down his arms, and he’s a pain to work with,” his father affirmed. “I know you got all close to the bugger, but he’s a junkie. I owe money to a junkie.”

“Not the worst that’s ever happened to us,” Will said, and his father scowled down at his sandwich, taking another ferocious bite.

“If he does come back, I’ll find a different way. No junkie is staying in my house.”

Will wanted to point out that he’d been staying with them for well over a month without any issue, but it wasn’t worth the argument. Winston came in from a run through the backyard, and at his shaking of snow every which way, it sent his father into another sort of tangent, redirecting him as he bemoaned and lamented their supposedly immaculate floors.

Will lay in bed that night, after school, after his session with Hannibal, and after homework that he’d had to all but rip from his hands. Time was taking control once more, and as he stared up at the ceiling, it gave him the same scene over and over and over again. Winston hopped up to lay beside him, and as he rubbed his ear, he couldn’t get the image of Hannibal’s eyes out of his head. They burned him with an unknown accusation, with a primal glow that told him that something wasn’t quite right. He rubbed his scalded lips, and he wondered when he was going to be pulled up on the bank or when he’d be swept away.

-

I enter the room, and everything slows down. I am a master of time, a master of manipulation. After all, time is nothing more than a human construct, and we first made it our judge, jury, and executioner. It passes us by only because we lack the conviction to reach out and take it. I am no such fool. In this world of my own design, it is I who rules.

You are tied to this chair, but that is merely for the sake of presentation. The drugs I pushed through your veins keep you sedate, and you smile as you live in another place entirely, another time. I allow this. It gives me leave to work without complaint, without strife. There is much to have done, but with my careful deliberation, I have created the means to succeed.

What I have administered is not the same high you once sought, but it will do. It softens you. It quiets you.

I kneel before you, and with swift action I remove your hands, the knife so finely honed there is only resistance when I reach the bone. This is not the first time I have fought against the construction of man; I succeed, and you are too lost to realize what will become of you. In this moment, you don't feel the blood that pours and pools between us. You are in the world I allowed you to live in, just for this short while.

That is soon to change.

When all is done, I take my prize, your screams of pain a symphony I will compose on the finest of instruments. Do you not see that your music will be forever ingrained in these walls, imprinted in my ears for eternity? What a gift we now share? But no; not we anymore. I am alone, and the only thing that remains is me.

Me and this thing you desired to take from me.

This is my design.

Will came to with a shocking clarity, hands pressed into a large pool of blood. With a gasp and a lurch he fell back onto his rear, and he looked up to a mutilated but very recognizable face, their eyes completely gone. The gaping darkness of their sockets accused him, and he let out a terrified shout as he scrambled to his feet and ran from the room, slipping on the slick cement. He burst out of the doors, hysteric, terrified –

-Right into the small semi-circle of FBI agents.

"Will," Jack said, but he pressed himself up against the wall and shook his head, small noises of terror trickling from him. He reached up to rub his face, to wipe away the memory of what he'd done, but at the sight of his blood-soaked hands, he let out another wheeze and slumped to the floor, trembling.

He didn't recall being removed from the crime scene. He just remembered the feeling of hands passing over his shoulders, water running along his palms to remove the traces of his violence. He shuddered, and everything around him churned in sluggish, slow motions, as though he were trapped underwater. He was, he was trapped, and he couldn't breathe, a silent scream ripping from him, bubbles rushing about him in the churning water as he –

“Will, are you listening?” Jack’s stern, cold voice pulled him from his thoughts. There was no water. There was no drowning. There was no blood. He looked up from the snow that blanketed a large, open field, and he shuddered.

“What?”

“What the hell happened in there? You contaminated the crime scene!” Jack gestured back, and he took a step closer, lowering his voice. “Where were you, Will?”

“I’m here,” Will murmured, unable to look at him. His head pounded, chanting *liar, liar, liar.*

“The hell you weren’t. I’ve never seen someone look so terrified, and I’ve worked in this field a long, long time.”

“I…I just got lost,” he stammered and he reached up to rub the throbbing pain between his brows. “I got lost.”

“You got lost,” Jack repeated, and Will nodded. “Where were you lost at?”

“I thought…I thought that I killed him,” Will said, and he blanched. He had, he had, *he had*. “I thought that I was the one that murdered him.” *Charlie. His name is Charlie and you killed him.*

“Isn’t that what you do? Isn’t that the point of me bringing a god damn kid to a crime scene? I’m putting my neck on the line because of the insight you’ve given me, and you’re two seconds away from mucking that up.”

“No, this felt…this felt real. I’m sorry, I didn’t…” Will closed his eyes, and the body flashed into view. Ants infested his skin, burrowed beneath the muscle and sinew to bite at his core. “I’m sorry.”

“…What did you see.” His voice was flat, unquestioning. Will rubbed his hands over his jacket, to wipe away any traces left of the blood, and he exhaled slowly.

“He’s…he’s jealous,” Will said. “This was anger. This was a righteous anger. This man tried to take something from him, or, or maybe he did take something from him –either way, he wasn’t going to get away unpunished. He cut off his hands like they do in other countries for theft, taking them back to a time of barbarianism, when an eye for an eye was…” Will gestured blinding, pinching the bridge of his nose. “This man coveted something from the killer. A lover? A friend? A family member? No, no, a…lover. He marred his face, and that was just angry overkill.”

“His eyes were trophies?” Jack asked.

“His eyes were removed so that he couldn’t see anymore,” Will said impatiently, disgusted. *You took Charlie’s eyes.*

“He wanted to taunt them while he killed them,” said Jack.

“No, *no*. He didn’t want his victim to be able to look at the person anymore. The golden ticket. The one that motivates everything he’s done to that man in there, is your golden ticket. The killer took his eyes so that he couldn’t see the golden ticket anymore, and he took his hands because he was a filthy thief, and that’s how you deal with thieves.”

“He’s missing a kidney, his brain and his liver,” Jack said, processing Will’s observations.

“Yeah, well, that’s because he’s eating them because he thinks that man in there is the equivalent of a pig,” Will snapped, and he leaned against the side of the warehouse. Heat rose up from his skin, a clammy, suffocating feeling.

“You must not be feeling well,” Jack said, tone darkening. “That must be the only reason you’re getting an attitude with me when I’m the one with a messed up crime scene.” Will nodded, not bothering to fight, not bothering to question because he sure felt like Hell, so it must be true.

“Do you have an aspirin?” he asked.

“I don’t,” Jack replied. Will nodded, accepting that too. When the pain faded, he opened his eyes once more and looked around, hunkering further into his Carhartt coat.

“I’m sorry,” he said, and out of the corner of his eye, he saw Jack nod.

“I need your head on straight. Are you in the saddle?”

“I’m in the saddle,” said Will, and he laughed, a gritty smile on his face. “I’m just… confused as to which direction I’m pointing.”

“So you got too far into his head. It happens, right? Where are you now?”

“I’m here,” Will said, but it was a wicked sort of lie to tell. Thankfully, Jack Crawford didn’t seem too inclined to delve into it.

“The victim is a Charlie Yorkman, thirty-two years old, works at a ship yard. We called his boss, and we were informed he had a habit of missing work due to drug relapses. Do you think a drug dealer did this? Maybe he owed him money, maybe he slept with the wrong girl?” Will shrugged, and he pretended that his fingers didn’t skitter and miss the buttons of his coat when he tried to button it up the rest of the way. It wasn’t Charlie. It wasn’t Charlie.

“I wasn’t in his head,” he mumbled.

“But you’re in the head of the one that killed him.”

“The man that killed him wasn’t a drug dealer, but he did use drugs on him. He…had *intimate* knowledge of that man’s weaknesses and exploited them.” Will glanced at Jack, then away quickly. Did he see? Did he see that Will knew him? Did he see that Will had violently ripped his eyes out while he screamed, reveling in the sounds of malevolent agony?

“So he watched him. He followed him.”

“He wanted him to know exactly why he was doing this. It was a game to him.” Will twitched against another shudder that started at his feet and worked up, and he looked around, searching. “I need to see Hannibal,” he added, rubbing his forehead. Hannibal would know what to do. Hannibal always knew the steps to take, the way to go.

In this moment, you are at your most beautiful.

“Well, I’ve got some work to do…I’ll allow it. You let me know when you get there so that I don’t have to worry about you the rest of the day.”

“Am I making you nervous, Jack?” Will asked. It was malignant, testing. There was a serrated edge of challenge, and Jack pursed his lips.

“I need my beauty sleep, and I can’t rest if I’m thinking about you running off and getting into more trouble.” He didn’t take the bait. Whatever he smelled coming off of Will, it wasn’t enough to fight him. He headed towards the door to the warehouse, and he opened it, looking over his shoulder to give Will a pointed, probing look. “You tell me when you get there, or else I’ll come find you.”

Will made it two steps up Hannibal’s walkway before he collapsed.

Chapter End Notes

So...that happened. Was it Will? Or...was it Hannibal? That is the question, isn't it? :)

All laughs aside, I am actually sad to say goodbye to Charlie. He's one of my favorite OC's with a pretty dense and detailed background that made him who he is, soo... yes. There we have it.

Thanks again for all of your love and continued support of this work!! :)

Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 24:

He slept, but he did not sleep. It came in blurred images, shifts between dreams and muted realities so that they blended to an unrecognizable nightmare.

"Where am I…?"

"I found you outside; you collapsed. You're running a fever, Will. What's happened?"

Hands passed over arms, legs, wrists; feeling, touching, caressing. Blood spattered across a concrete floor, and Charlie cried in agonizing horror, begging to let it end, begging to let it…

"Stop lying, j-just stop lying to me, please!" Begging. Hands grasping, gripping, kneading against threads that hold and do not break, arms that ensnare and do not let him get away. A blue light flashes, flashes. With each flash he is farther gone, and he cries, teeth gritted against the ache that builds just at his temples, screaming for release, clawing for the small bit of relief, just one more dose of pain medicine, just one more to keep it away…

The feeling of falling, falling, falling, though there is no ground to fall to, no place where he will land. An eternity of darkness gives chase, suffocates him until every last drop of breath is gone.

"You're in a safe place. You're safe. When you close your eyes, you will feel calmness, serenity. No harm can come to you here."

Nicholas Boyle does not lunge, does not fight. He is terrified –why? Reaching for him but he's dead, he's gaping open in the air, and the kisses taste like triumph, a bitter, ugly victory.

"You're going into shock. I can help with that."

No, no, no, no, no…

Jared Freeman speaks through him, and he sees it is not his skin anymore, but a patchwork quilt of all those he's tainted, ruined. He's running, sprinting, but someone stops, reaches palm to palm in holy palmer's kiss. It's not enough –it's a lie. He lifts the gun and shoots, and it'll be over soon, it'll be over soon.

"I killed him, I feel like I killed him, oh my god –what am I? What am I?"

The cold, the snow, the headlights. He's drowning on air, but he sees everyone is breathing fine. The ravenstag impales him, and it takes the hit of the car, harming him but

ultimately saving his life in the process. He goes flying, and as he lays in the dark, dark forest, he passes hands over his wounds, thinking that if this is how he's going to go, at least no one had to see him fall.

"Will?" Abigail asked, and Will opened his eyes. He was in Abigail's bed at the institute, the short distance between them shared by the quiet whisper of his name. He stared at her face, features sharp in the muted light, and he reached up, brushing away a stray hair. She allowed the touch, although her gaze narrowed when he shivered.

"I don't know how I got here," he confessed, and he pressed his head to the pillow to ease the pounding in his skull.

"You came in through the same window I sneak out of," she replied. He thought that it would be appropriate to sit up, to put distance between them and what Abigail was capable of, but every inch of him ached, and breathing was too difficult. He lay on top of the covers with her underneath, her hands placed under her head as a prop. It was alright to lay still for a little while; it was alright.

"Did you sneak out after last time?" he asked when he could speak again.

"Only once," said Abigail. Her eyes traced his face, and she inhaled sharply, finding something awful there.

"To see Hannibal?"

"It's not always to see Hannibal. Sometimes to just sit in the park you and I sat at, once. Before everything fell apart." Will knew the park. He nodded, and he was there between Alana and Abigail, staring at the vast expanse of a world that got along far better than he could. Things were better then. Tentatively grasping, but at least he had a hold. Something tainted the park, though, something with nothing but a black abyss for eyes and antlers stained with blood. The memory was no good, and he shook his head rapidly, whining low in his throat.

"I feel like I'm drowning, Abigail," he said quietly. "And I'm losing what little grasp I had over myself."

"Do you think you're my dad?" The question was presented with wide eyes. She froze, and he thought of the first time Hannibal had cornered him, how he'd frozen as well – no one liked to talk about the prey that froze. No one liked to talk about the prey that knew no matter what they did, they were trapped. It was to acknowledge that sometimes, fighting or fleeing didn't work, the same way that freezing didn't work. Sometimes, one was trapped before they ever even began.

"I don't know who I am anymore. I don't understand what I'm capable of…I'm bleeding into the skins of people I've never even met."

"Not a skin that hates me, though?" she asked.

“Not even close,” Will promised. Abigail nodded, and the tension left her shoulders. They were two secrets compressed on a small twin bed in a psychiatric institute, and for the moment, the world was holding its breath.

“Hannibal said you’re having a hard time,” she informed him when he didn’t say anything else. He swallowed heavily and nodded.

“I am,” he agreed. Hannibal, Hannibal; there was something about Hannibal.

“You look like you have a fever,”

“I do.”

“Why did you come here, then?” She blinked slowly, languidly at him. Will laughed, a hiss of air between his clenched teeth.

“You’re the only thing that I have left,” he said. “Isn’t that sad?”

“A little,” she said, and they shared a smile, one of savagery and horror alike, like they could somehow make it better if they suffered together. That was the truth for survivors, though, and that’s what they were. Will just wanted to know when he could finally stop living like it, when he would finally stop seeing the monster in the mirror.

“I think maybe I should check into a hospital,” he said, and she nodded.

“You look like you should check into a hospital.”

“I won’t stay the night, don’t worry. I don’t want you to get into trouble. They’ll think I’m taking advantage of you.” Abigail snickered at that, her eyes rolling dramatically.

“Hannibal told me that the two of you were lovers,” Abigail revealed, and even she seemed shocked by her words. Her hands moved to cover her mouth, like she could somehow reel them back in, and Will was horrified to discover the emotion underlying his reaction wasn’t disgust or discomfort, but a steady pulse of pleasure. Was that the thing about Hannibal? They were lovers? Hannibal said they were exclusive? God, he couldn’t even *remember* something as important as that anymore.

“Is that what he said?”

“Is it true?” she pressed. He shook his head, mouth gaping to try and find the words.

“I don’t know what we are. I don’t feel like I know anything anymore, at least; not enough to answer with conviction.”

“But you long for him,” Abigail said, and it appeared that whatever expression was on Will’s face, it was enough for her. “You want to be with him right now.”

“I do,” Will said quietly. “But I’m afraid.”

“What are you so scared of?” she asked. “What does Will Graham have to fear above all else?”

“What if I’m not enough? What if in the end…I destroy myself?” Abigail reached out, and she pressed her palm to his heartbeat, staring at it intently. She glanced up at Will, and she smiled gently.

“You survived me,” she said, and that was all that Will needed to hear. He grabbed his coat, and he snuck through the window, ignoring the biting chill of the late night, as it protested his presence. Short, curt puffs of air billowed from his lips, and he climbed into his truck, firing it up. He blinked, and frantic, trembling hands shook as it steered him towards freedom, towards safety. He blinked again, and he was driving with a steady grip, heading towards a house he’d driven to for many times before. When he reached it, he put it in park and strode towards the door, knocking on it with short, heavy bursts, his fingers tapping and drumming against his pant leg erratically.

When Hannibal opened the door, expression guarded, Will did not hesitate. He threw his arms around his neck and kissed him, all of his fear, his rage, and his confusion melting away, leaving nothing but the taste of his lips and the heat that radiated off of him in intoxicating waves. Hannibal was surprised for only a moment. When he realized who it was, he dropped something with a clatter and grasped at the door, yanking it closed against the cold as he hungrily moved his lips against Will’s. There was a fumbling of hands, of teeth that crashed against one another as they pressed too close. There were no words; words were long since burned away, nothing but a primal, dark need to devour, to consume.

Will pressed him against the wall in the hallway and dragged his tongue over Hannibal’s lips, hands roving over his chest, his shoulders, and along his neck. He tangled his fingers in his hair, and he dragged his teeth along his lips, needing. Wanting. Hannibal groaned, a low rumble in the back of his throat, and he pushed back, slamming Will against the opposite wall as his body slid along his, thigh pressed taut between his legs. Will was trapped from knee to chest, unable to do anything but let out a low, agonized groan as Hannibal undid the snaps to his coat, yanking it off of him and throwing it to the ground, his breath smooth and even despite the way his heart thundered against him as he rubbed his thigh against his growing desire.

Will wasn’t quite sure how they managed to get from the hallway to the bedroom; everything was a blur of clothes, of teeth on pleading skin, of pauses between fumbling footsteps as they stopped to steal another taste. Will found himself on his back on Hannibal’s bed, Hannibal sliding along his body sensually, slowly. His hips pressed to Will’s, acknowledging his arousal with a teasing pressure, and his gasp was swallowed up as Hannibal pressed a lazy, deep kiss to his lips. Will was drunk off of it, and as Hannibal paused, poised above him, he opened his eyes and stared, meeting his gaze without hesitation.

“Do you know what you’re doing?” Hannibal asked, his voice gravel. He let go of Will’s side to reach up and slide his fingers over his cheek.

“I haven’t been this much in control of myself for a long time,” he replied, and he grabbed Hannibal by the back of his head, pulling him down for another spine-tingling kiss

that left him reeling, stars behind his eyelids as Hannibal showed him just how much he wanted to consume him.

-

He woke late; laziness was a drug that'd soaked into his skin and left him sunk into the pillows and blankets piled about him with languid bliss. Sunlight spilled across the bottom of the bed, and Will opened heavy-lidded eyes to study the slant of it, a sleepy groan passing his lips. He rubbed his head and considered sitting up, but the effort was too much. His thumb brushed along his bottom lip, and he could still taste Hannibal's skin. At the thought of it, he smiled ever-so-slightly and arched his back, rolling over to press his face to the pillow.

Just at the edge of the bed, Charlie Yorkman watched without eyes.

When he found it in himself to get up, he debated taking a shower, but he tossed that idea aside. For the first time in a quite some time, he felt that his skin was his own, and he could still feel every inch of it that'd been touched. He didn't want to ruin it. He nudged his feet into his jeans that were discarded by the bedroom door, then found his shirt in the hallway about halfway down. Part of him wondered where Hannibal was, and if he minded the mess of clothes strewn about –he decided it wasn't important. He followed the scent of cooking meat, and he found Hannibal poised over the stove in the kitchen, making breakfast.

"Good morning," he said, ducking his head. He couldn't quite meet his gaze, somehow sheepish now that he was wearing yesterday's clothes. Hannibal looked up, studying from head to toe before he smiled.

"Good morning, Will," he said lightly. "Did you sleep well?"

"I did." Will walked closer and paused, keeping the island between them. "I'm…sorry for bursting in like that."

"On the contrary, I found it rather pleasant," Hannibal said, adding a pinch of salt over whatever was in the pan. "When you surprise me in the future, it should be more along those lines rather than lost time and disappearances that result in my almost calling Agent Crawford."

"What?"

"Do you remember your visit to my home just two days ago?" Hannibal looked back down to his work, elegant fingers dancing over the minced and chopped herbs and onions.

"…No." Will's neck grew hot, and he gripped the counter top.

"You collapsed in my front yard Tuesday afternoon, and by the time I found you, you'd been unconscious for some time. I was able to regulate your temperature and lower the fever, but you became erratic upon waking. You left despite my protests, and I didn't hear from you Wednesday or Thursday."

"…What's today?" Will asked hollowly.

"Friday morning."

"…Oh," he said, and that's all that he could say. His fingers pawed at his phone and opened it, but there were no messages or missed calls from his father or Jack. He looked at the text messages, but the last one was from Beverly on Tuesday, confirming homework. He shut the phone with a snap and set it on the counter, nodding.

"I lost time," he informed Hannibal. Hannibal nodded gravely.

"You lost time." He stirred a few things around in the skillet and frowned down at it, like it could solve his problem. Will sat down on one of the stools, and his fingers dug into the cushion of it, like it could rip it in two with will alone. His rear twinged with a pleasant sort of ache, distracting.

"I remember waking up at a crime scene…I thought I'd killed them."

"Is that what you last remember?" Hannibal asked.

"That's why I came here," Will said slowly. "I don't remember going to the crime scene, I don't remember…" He stopped. Started again. "Someone murdered Charlie."

Saying it made it real. He leaned across the island and buried his face in his hands, fingertips pressed roughly to his eyes to stop the tears that threatened to fall. His eyelids burned, coals against his retinas, and he shuddered.

S-stop lying –please stop lying to me!

You've had a seizure…

"That was the crime scene he took you to?" Hannibal asked. He stopped cooking and walked around the counter, grabbing Will's shoulders gently. "You don't remember going?"

"I'd have said no; I don't remember ever saying yes," Will whispered. He allowed himself to be turned, and he lifted his head to look up at Hannibal, teeth gritted together tightly.

"My condolences, Will." Hannibal said, squeezing his shoulders tightly. "I know he meant something to you."

"When I came to… I felt like I'm the one that killed him," he confessed, and he reached up to grab Hannibal's hand tightly. "Anyone that gets too close to me becomes endangered. What if that's what I'm doing when I lose time? I don't know the Will that's Will when I lose time. I feel like I'm drowning on air, like I'm forcing myself under, and I…I can't fathom what it is I do when I can't remember. What if I'm-"

"The one that's killing them?" Hannibal suggested. It stopped Will cold, and as he stared at Hannibal, a calm, light glow from the window outlined him. It was ethereal, peaceful. Will swallowed heavily and looked down, blinking rapidly.

“I think,” he said slowly, “that I should see a medical doctor.”

“Are your headaches worse?” Hannibal asked, lifting a hand to his head. He felt his temperature, then released him, moving to oven as it pinged.

“Yes.” Hannibal hmm’d under his breath at that, and he turned as he removed something from the oven, the smell of freshly baked potato filling the air. It contrasted the somehow bleak, tepid air that draped around Will oppressively.

“If they could bring some insight to your position, it’s for the best. What happens if it is not neurological though, but mental?”

“What do you mean?” Will asked, looking up.

“What are you going to do if they run the tests on your brain and it’s not a neurological illness, but a mental illness?” He set the pan down on oven mitts on the counter, leaning in to inhale the scent.

“…Probably try and find someone that can treat that,” he said reluctantly.

“You don’t trust me to?”

“Is it really ethical to? If we…” His voice trailed off, and he coughed to dispel the pressure in his chest. He looked down and traced over his wrist, almost able to see the kiss marks Hannibal had left behind there. From over his shoulder, Charlie peered down to see, too.

“That is a fair statement,” Hannibal said. “Although, as I said before, I’m not your psychiatrist. I’m your friend.”

He served a salmon quiche, Will to his right at the elegant dining room table. When Will would look up from his food, he’d find Hannibal watching him, a small, delicate smile on his lips. It made him self-conscious in a heady, dizzying way, and he looked back to his food, taking another bite. His left hand rested on the table, and halfway through the meal, Hannibal reached over and lightly caressed it, encasing Will’s hand in his own to hold. Will looked at it, then to his face, and he swallowed his food with difficulty. He made no move to remove his hand.

“I must correct my earlier statement,” Hannibal said lightly, like they were discussing the weather. “We are far more than just friends, Will.”

“…Oh,” Will managed. He swallowed his food and nodded, a short laugh bursting from him. “That’s a relief.”

“And I do offer my sincerest condolences. Would you like to talk about what happened at the crime scene, when you saw your friend?” That stopped his smile cold. He grimaced, and the blood pooled between them, hands without arms that lay in the loss of life, forgotten.

You take them fishing?

I take them fishing.

"I don't want to think about that right now," he said hollowly, taking another bite of food. It turned to ash in his mouth, dry and rotten. "I think that's…something I'd actually just like to forget entirely. One of the few things I'd trade if I got a better memory instead."

"Is that why you came here? You needed help replacing it with something else?" Though faint, a sliver of apprehension slid through his question. Will shook his head.

"I wanted something real. Something…tangible. When I closed my eyes to think about what I wanted most in the world, all that I could see was you."

"I'm happy to oblige," Hannibal said, and Will heard the smile in his voice.

"You're going to get eaten," Jared said from across the table. He glared at Will, and it was the most tangible he'd been in a long, long time. Will forced himself to swallow his food, and he stared at the image, frozen. God, he needed to see a doctor.

Hannibal saw Will to the door after breakfast, when they'd collected all of his things from the hallway to the bedroom. At the slight tear near one of the buttons on his shirt, Will laughed, then Hannibal laughed, and they stood in the hallway, arms full of clothing they'd been in such a hurry to remove that they'd ripped them to pieces. When he got into his truck, he headed towards home and decided that everything was going to be alright.

It had to be.

Such ideals, while optimistic and hopeful, are ultimately, tragically wrong. When Will pulled up to the house to the image of five SUV's and a couple of police cars, he realized with a sinking, dark sensation that no matter how hard he grasped, he'd always lose his footing and fall.

Jack Crawford waited for him as he turned off the car and climbed out. The police lights lazily flashed although no siren sounded, and he winced at the blue that spun about and occasionally hit him with its beam. It wasn't an invasive light; it was muted. It still stung him though, pricked at something in the back of his head he couldn't reach, couldn't quite touch.

"Good morning, Will," Jack said, and it wasn't anywhere close to the same tone Hannibal had used when he greeted him earlier. Will frowned at the cars, then back to Jack, confused. His fight or flight instinct was flaring up, telling him that he had to run, and he had to run far.

He froze.

"Is something wrong?" he asked shakily.

"You know, there really is," Jack laughed, and he slung an arm around Will's shoulder, pulling him in tight. "Tuesday, I had you take a look at the crime scene of a man by the name of Charlie Yorkman. You had a fit of some sort, and I removed you from the crime scene. Interesting enough, not once in that entire encounter do I recall you ever mentioning

that that very man you faced down in that warehouse was actually one that you lived with up until that point when he disappeared."

Will's blood turned to ice. Bits and pieces came back to him, of Charlie's face, of his missing eyes, his missing hands. Breakfast churned in his stomach, and he had to fight to keep it down, his eyes darting from the cop cars to the agents that scoured the entire property with purpose. He'd thought to tell him, thought to inform him of his dark, twisted luck, that kept piling bodies up around him until he was going to drown in them, but he'd blacked out before he could, time lost and never regained. Now, it seemed, it was too late. What little time he had wasn't even his own.

"I didn't…"

"So then I show up here, and I find a dog that isn't registered to you keeping guard. We ran the chip information, and that dog belongs to the deceased Cassie Boyle." That was news to Will. He almost doubled over, sucker-punched, but Jack hauled him along, unwilling to let him drop. His grip was iron, a dark suspicion rippling off of him.

"If it was the one, I'd chock it up to a nasty coincidence from a kid who's seen a lot in a little bit of time," Jack continued. He shoved Will forward until he stumbled and fell against a cop car, and his expression darkened. "But two in one day is probable cause, and we're searching this place."

"I didn't…do anything," Will stammered, and Jack held up his hand.

"If you haven't, then we're not going to find anything. But for now, you probably don't want to say a word," he advised, and he motioned to two cops to keep an eye on Will. Jack walked away, towards the barn, and Will pressed his palms to his face, sweat beading at his temples. This wasn't happening. This wasn't happening,

"This isn't real," he told himself, but he was grounded enough in the moment that he knew it was a lie without even having to consider it. Lazily, the blue lights flashed and blinded him with each pulse, unheeding of the way that his breath came short with it, the way his palms grew clammy and cold.

You're in a safe place. Safe. Comforted. Safe.

"C-can you turn off the lights," he asked one of the cops, but they didn't answer. He rubbed his eyes, the light piercing him, swaying against him as it knocked him back into the waves, reeling, spinning. Needles, sharp and vicious pricked along his veins from his feet up, and the longer that Will stood there, the worse it became, red-hot in the way that it spread like a rash, burning, burning, and when he whined in pain, a cop turned towards him.

He's going to devour you.

"What's he doing," one of them murmured, but Will couldn't hear it, not the way that heard Charlie's screams as he begged for mercy, for the pain to end. He blinked, and he licked the blood from his knife, the taste of iron and pennies hot on his tongue. It was the

sweetest of flavors, the essence of another. Across from him, Garrett Jacob Hobbs smiled, his mouth black and gaping.

Would you like see what someone else's blood tastes like?

Will fell to his knees and grasped his head, the blue light flashing, flashing. Heat poured from him, and across his arm he saw his skin blister and burst. He was cold, he was hot, and he clawed at his arm to get the needles out; he didn't need the needles in his skin, he didn't *want* the needles in his skin. Shivers racked his body, and as someone came running, the last thing he saw was the ravenstag watching him between the police cars before it all went black.

Chapter End Notes

So...that happened. Things seem to be unable to really settle down for Will, yes? :)

Thank you so much for all of your continued feedback and support! We've got about 2 chapters left in this guy now. I just realized I'd be wrapping up this guy and Dread and Hunger at the same time, and I'm not sure how to process that? Bleh.

Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 25:

“You’re going to die,” Jared Freeman says, sitting beside me. We’re at the park in Georgia, watching the clouds overhead with a lazy attention to detail. No one hunts for rabbits or dragons among the moisture and perfect blend of elements. We stare up at them, unseeing. They are fake, a mocking creation of a memory that once was. This isn’t real. None of this was real.

“We all die,” I say.

“Yeah, but you’re going to be in a living death. My coffin rests six feet under, but yours will be a six by six with a metal pisser.”

“I didn’t do anything wrong.” Jared finds that funny. He curls over himself and laughs, hands pressed to his throat to soften the noise. The snickers shiver and choke in the air, and I watch dispassionately.

“You killed Garrett Jacob Hobbs, you killed Cassie Boyle, you killed the woman that birthed your Venus, you killed Marissa Schurr, you killed Nicholas Boyle, and you killed Charlie Yorkman. Your body count is stacking up.”

“I only killed two of them,” I say, but the look in his eyes as he turns towards me is haunting and cold.

“You think I don’t know what’s inside of you?” he seethes, creeping closer. He reeks of decay, of the cold, dark earth I know him to be buried in, the things that creep and crawl beneath our feet. “You think that when you look in the mirror, it’s not me looking out?”

“You’re dead,” I whisper, but he grabs me by the neck and throws me to the ground. He kneels over me, knee in my intestines, and he chokes the air from me with a vicious, uncontrolled anger.

“You kept me alive, you sadistic animal. When I died, all others were ready to let me go, but not you. You were so far inside of me that it felt like you’d pulled the trigger on yourself, right? You had to keep me alive so that you could continue living, right?” He squeezes, and I struggle for air, struggle to push the words from my lips that will save me.

“And while you are so busy trying to peel me from your skin like I’m the monster, you completely missed the real demon that’s been circling us like a hawk for months. I tried to tell you. I tried to show you! A monster knows a monster, Will Graham, and I’ve been watching you look in the wrong corner for too fucking long.

“Do you see him now? In the shadows? Your demon that you lay with, demon that you press palm to palm and ache for? The demon that crawls into your ear while you sleep and whispers naughty nightmares –I hear them, even when you don’t. You’re so busy trying to get rid of me that you ran into the arms of something even worse than whatever I could hope to be.”

There is a whisper around us as he chokes me, a hiss of breath that makes him pause. Jared loosens the hold on my throat, and I wheeze for breath, clawing at his hands so that I can inhale deeply. His knee shifts in my gut, holding me in place. His head quirks up, animalistic, and he sniffs the air, every inch of him going very, very still.

“Do you hear him?” he asks me. “Do you hear him as he approaches to kill us?”

“Who?” I whimper, but he covers my mouth with his hand. His eyes are calculating, dark. A hunter that knows when they’re being hunted is equally dangerous. They know the steps to take, the action and reaction that will make them the apex predator.

“Sh, sh,” he soothes, fingers dragging over my lips. “You can’t save us from him, but I can. That’s why you kept me around, right? That’s the real reason?”

“Who are you going to kill?” I ask, and he begins to melt into me, sinking into my bones and shifting them, moving about until he’s comfortable within my skin, within my very being. Where once it was painful, somehow this is pattern, this being that I am now, is completely, wholly me.

“The devil,” we say, and we stand up, hands curling into fists. Just across from us, the devil waits with his wicked horns, ready to impale us.

“His fever has gone down somewhat, although at one hundred degrees it’s still not quite where we want it to be.”

“I still don’t know what happened. He was standing beside the car, then he collapsed.”

“We’re going to run a few tests to see what we’re dealing with, but this isn’t a normal fever. Is he prone to seizures?”

“I don’t know.”

“I suggest you find someone that does know. I don’t have any medical records of him here that will help me understand just what we’re dealing with.”

“I know someone that can help.”

Footsteps retreated, and a door closed with a muted click. Will’s eyes flew open, and he stared up at the white ceiling, heartbeat calm and steady despite the drumming of adrenaline that was slowly uncurling in his gut. It didn’t take long to see exactly where he was: white ceilings, the smell of piss and cleaning agent, starched sheets, and walls tacked with various laws and regulations crowded around him. A hospital.

His hand was cuffed to the side of the bed, and Will didn't hesitate. He'd dislocated his thumb before, under far worse circumstances. This time he almost enjoyed the lurching pain that lanced from his joint up to his elbow, and he made quick work of removing the IV and heart monitor, sliding from bed and hitting the floor with a quiet *thump*.

The clock on the wall read 2:13 P.M.

He locked the door to the room and scouted out his surroundings, finding his shoes tucked underneath the hospital bed with his coat laying across the end of it. Apparently he hadn't been in such dire straits that they'd needed to change him into a hospital gown, which he appreciated. It would have taken time to change, time he didn't have because time wasn't a thing that seemed to exist anymore for him. He knew exactly who Jack Crawford was going to fetch, and the last person in the world he wanted to see was Hannibal finding him in such a horrific position.

"*You've had a mild seizure."*

Everything was autopilot, action and reaction, and without a second thought, he opened the window and crawled out of it, landing on the backside of the hospital and into snow covered shrubbery. No one lurked about, no FBI agents to haul him back in, and he closed the window behind him, slipping out of the shrubs like it was completely normal to wander about the topiary in the middle of winter. A nurse was on break when he rounded the corner, but since he didn't acknowledge her, she didn't acknowledge him. He walked by casually, head ducked and hands in his pockets, and he headed towards the cars.

6.7% of cars stolen were stolen with the keys still inside of them. Out of the minimum of approximately one hundred cars in the parking lot, at least six of them had a key inside. Will scoped them out, pausing at a car that looked like it'd seen its prime in 2004, and he slipped inside, hands passing along the visor casually. The key fell into his lap, and he started the car with a savage grin, pulling out of the parking lot and driving away as quickly as was casual, head pounding. There was no time to think. There was no time to consider the implications. Beside him, Garrett Jacob Hobbs sat in the passenger seat and smiled, head turned towards the window.

"If you're running, it's because you're guilty," he said, leaking blood onto the seat.

"Don't make me kill you again," Will warned. Hobbs decided to remain silent, blood dripping soundlessly. He'd have to get the car detailed before he returned it.

Sneaking into Abigail's room was so easy, he wondered how Nicholas Boyle hadn't managed to do it. As he crawled in through the window, Abigail watched from the couch with only the mildest of surprise, hands plucking at the scarf tied prettily around her neck.

"You're allowed to visit me normally," she said, but when he turned to her, she blanched. "Oh my God, Will; you look like death."

"Do I?" he asked, scoping out the room. No one else lurked, although he checked under the bed to make sure. He paced across the room, peeked out into the hallway, then turned back to her and gestured back. "They don't let you lock the door. They don't lock."

“They said certain patients made it so that they only lock doors from the outside,” she replied, standing up. “Will, are you alright? You…you really don’t look well.”

“No,” he said pleasantly, rocking back on his feet. “I’m being accused of murder, and I woke up handcuffed in a hospital.”

“What? Whose murder?”

“That doesn’t matter,” he said, waving a hand impatiently. “I didn’t kill him, though. You know that, right? You know that?” The aggression fled from his voice at the question, and it softened him. He stared at Abigail, and he willed her to see, his eyes wild with desperation. Could she see his innocence? Could she see that his hands weren’t stained by Charlie’s life? Out of anyone in the world, Abigail of all people would be able to know just how much he didn’t want to hurt anyone. Alana had seen a glimpse of it –why not Abigail?

“Hannibal said you wouldn’t remember,” she whimpered, and he froze. Sometimes, prey froze because the surprise completely shut their response system down. Sometimes, prey froze because even when they thought they could suspect anything, they found themselves blindsided by something so utterly far off base that there was nothing they could do.

“…What did you say?” he asked, taking a step to her. Abigail seemed to realize her mistake, and she took a step back.

“What?”

“Hannibal said that I wouldn’t remember what exactly, Abigail?” Will whispered, and he strode across the room to grab her, locking her in place as he hauled her close. She leaned away from him, terror mirrored in her eyes. It should have stopped him, to see her so scared, but Jared controlled his limbs, and *God* was he angry.

I told you…I fucking told you. He’s going to kill us you fucking moron.

“Will, you’ve had a mild seizure.”

“H-how did I get here, Hannibal?”

“H-he said that…you were struggling with memory. You had a seizure, I d-don’t know, *something*, and-”

“What don’t I remember, *Abigail*?” he hissed, and he pressed her against the wall with acute care, leaning close enough to kiss. “And why is it that you know when I don’t?”

“I-I killed Nicholas Boyle, not you,” she gasped, and she closed her eyes tightly, the words falling from her like a tumultuous wave. “You panicked when he showed up at your house, a-and you forced him to drive you to Hannibal’s.”

“What were you doing there?” Will demanded. He remembered his knife, the moonlight, and the will to hurt someone. At that, a wall slammed before him, a wall with blue tint that made his ears ring, a sharp, pinging noise that made dots dance in front of his eyes. He shook his head slowly and whined.

"I'd snuck out to see him –he told me he knew about me being…"

"The bait. You were your father's *bait*." Will hissed, and Abigail nodded.

"I was scared and had to make sure he didn't tell anyone about it. Th-that agent showed up, and I…I had to make sure. Then you showed up with that boy, and I panicked. I took your knife and I stabbed him, and you had a seizure."

"I had a seizure," Will repeated slowly.

"It's a mild seizure."

"You d-don't seem concerned about that…"

"I said mild, Abigail."

Will winced, and he let go of Abigail's shoulders to press his hands to his head, a whimper climbing up his throat. His eyes burned, watered, and he moved away from her, shaking his head.

"I didn't…kill Nicholas Boyle," he said, dazed.

"I'm so sorry, Will," Abigail said, staying pressed against the wall. "Hannibal said that it would be better for you to think that. H-he said the two of you would protect me."

"I protected you," said Will, shaking his head savagely. "I *protected* you, and you let me think that I was a murderer?"

"He said you'd keep my secret," she said, and it was a plea as much as it was a statement. *Will you keep my secret?*

"Will you keep our secret?"

"I can't…think," Will said, and he fell back onto the bed, sitting down as he buried his head in his arms. "The FBI thinks I killed someone else, and they're going to find out about him, Abigail. They're going to find out."

"Not if you don't tell them," she pleaded, and she rushed to him, grabbing his hands. "He said you'd protect me."

"They're at my house, scouring over it to find evidence!" he shouted, ripping his hands from her. "They're going to find evidence," he realized, thinking of his hunting knife. They'd find it, and surely no matter how hard he scrubbed, the blood remained? Where had Hannibal taken his things?

Why had Hannibal lied?

"What do we do? What do we do, what –oh my god," she moaned, and she dragged her hands through her hair, turning away from him. Her shoulders shook, trembled, and she

paced the room, footsteps carrying her from one end to the other. “Will, what are we going to do?”

“We have to go,” Will said, standing up. “We have to go.”

“Where?” she turned to him, blue eyes wild.

“To the last place that any of this made sense,” he said, and he headed towards the window. “Get your coat.”

The drive was long, but it gave him time to think. Unlike his truck, with its lack of music or ability to find a station, the random hospital worker’s car had plenty of CD’s and even an auxiliary cord that Abigail took advantage of. She fiddled with the songs, the volume, the wiring –anything to keep her busy. Her hands fluttered and darted from place to place, and he kept an eye on those as much as he kept an eye on the road. They’d know he was missing; they’d have known rather quickly. Although he kept his foot firmly on the gas pedal, each blip in the road reminded him with pressing clarity: the further he ran, the guiltier he looked.

He wasn’t the one that was guilty, though. Abigail was. Somehow, that made it vastly important that he keep driving.

The curves of the winding drive were as familiar to him as the dirt road to get home. The car didn’t much care for the snow uphill, but he forced it to behave, climbing along the dirt path until they came to the end, his hands fumbling with the E-brake before he shut it off and stared, snow falling gently against the scene where everything went to hell.

“Why here?” Abigail asked, voice small.

“I need to think,” he said, and he got out. The cabin still had yellow tape across the door, but he ripped it off and walked inside, the musty, untouched air assaulting him. He didn’t look back for Abigail. He knew she’d follow.

A fine layer of dust lay across the long since empty work bench and chairs, and he was careful not to touch, his eyes good enough that he didn’t need his hands to confirm what he saw. His feet carried him upstairs, and he walked with frank deliberation towards the center of Garrett Jacob Hobbs’ trophy room in all its horrific splendor. He blinked, and it was *his* trophy room, his collection of prizes of those who’d paid the ultimate price for his game. He blinked again, and Abigail stood in front of him, gaze pinned to the place where Marissa bled her last drop.

“Is…is that where…” She couldn’t say it. Her voice trembled, and she looked down.

“That is where I first found out that you were as good a fisherman as you were a hunter,” Will said, voice black as pitch. “And that is where your friend Marissa died.”

She walked to it, her shoes stopping just at the edge of the blood stain, just as Will’s had. He wasn’t quite sure why they kept the place so ugly, dirty. Perhaps they were still attempting to investigate, still attempting to find the underlying nuances of Garrett Jacob

Hobbs and Nicholas Boyle's murders. The moment he thought the second name, though, he shook his head. It didn't sit right with him, no matter how many times he tried to think it.

"P-please stop lying to me!"

"Nicholas didn't kill those girls," he revealed, and Abigail turned to him.

"Wh-what?"

"I thought he had because the obvious evidence told me that. The longer I look at that killer, though –his body suspended before me in nothing but shadows –the more I see that he didn't do it. Boyle was set up."

"Set up by who?" Abigail asked, and something in the nervous plucking of her sleeve drew his eye. He tilted his head and observed her closed-in stance. Secret, secret; Abigail had a secret.

"That's the question, isn't it?" he said, more to himself than her. He paced the room, fingers brushing over the antlers like they were his, like he'd put them there himself. "Who would want to make a design so grand as this? Who would take the time to cultivate everything to what it is today, in this exact place and time?"

"Will, I have to tell you something," Abigail said quietly. He paused in his steps and turned to her, brows lifted in mock surprise.

"Another secret?" he taunted.

"Yes." Her voice trembled, but she stood straight. Her hands clenched, unclenched, and she cast her gaze back to the blood, then to him again. "The person that called my dad the night he attacked you-"

"That's the one that killed Marissa. That's the one that killed Marissa, that's the one that killed Cassie, Charlie, and the woman in the museum," Will said, nodding.

"I'd never heard his voice before that call. I did after, though."

"Who is it, Abigail?" Will prompted, dangerously quiet. His ribs ached with the thought, with the need to hear her say what his heart was screaming, and as the stag slowly crept up to breathe down his neck, he glared at her.

"It was Hannibal."

"You're not alone…this is our little secret."

"Will you keep our secret?"

"I am keeping her secret."

"And why…was Hannibal calling your father?" he asked, his voice not his own.

“Hannibal told my dad that you knew who and what he was,” Abigail whispered, and tremors racked her body as she looked away from him. Whatever the expression was on his face, it terrified her. “He told him you’d figured it out.

“I hadn’t,” Will retorted sharply. A sharp ringing sounded in his ears, and he shook his head, trying to dislodge the irritant.

“The first night that I snuck out to see him, I did it because I wanted to tell him that I knew. Then he said he knew what my dad made me do, and we were at a stalemate. I kept his secret, and he kept mine.”

“Why…why would he call your father? Why would he do this to me?” Will asked, and he shook his head again, the ringing growing louder, louder. “Why would he make me think that I killed Nicholas Boyle? Why would he…”

“I was curious.”

“Will?” Abigail asked, and he stood before her, lifting her up and slamming her against the antlers with brute force, impaling her. Her eyes widened in shock, then agonizing pain as her brain realized just what was happening to her. She opened her mouth to scream, but the air rushed from her, a lung punctured in the attack. Her hands jerked, reached, clenched. Her feet kicked, trying to gain purchase, but she was too far off of the ground. He leaned in, shoving her further on the rack, and he smiled into her anguish.

“Because I wanted to see what would happen,” he whispered, and he pushed her as far back as she could go, blood spattering across his shoes in an elegant, artistic fashion. He stared down at his shoes, breathing heavily, and he laughed, reaching down to drag his finger through the blood and lick it, eyes closed to the flavor.

“Would you like to see what someone else’s blood tastes like?”

When he came to, he was in the trophy room, curled up on the ground. He ached, a pain lancing from neck to skull, and he sat up in the darkness, confused. The time on his watch said 2:13 A.M., and as he looked about, confused, he saw that Abigail was nowhere in sight.

“Abigail,” he croaked, and he hauled himself to his feet, hurrying towards the stairs. He stumbled, almost fell down them, but managed to catch himself, falling against the door to the cabin with a heavy thud. The fever was back, a hot poker stabbing into his eye like the worst sort of lobotomy. He opened the door to the bright moonlight and the white snow, and it didn’t take two steps out of the door to see. He could see.

He could see.

Blood spattered along the brilliant white, a macabre display. Underneath the moonlight, it looked black, but the churning mass of snowfall, of shoe prints and dragged bodies told him that of course it was blood because only blood could look so beautiful and so horrifying at the exact same time.

“Abigail?” he called out, his voice trembling. He sunk to his knees, staring at the place where he once held her neck and willed her to live. What had he done? What had he done?

Will, what have you done?

“Abigail!” he shouted, and the silence of the forest around him mocked him with secrets that it’d never tell.

Chapter End Notes

Welp, we've got one chapter left. This is the one that I did say I'd do a sequel for, but that will take some outlining and planning! Thank you again for all of the continued support for this work --this is the first one I started for the fandom, so it's got a special place for me. :)

Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 26:

He called Jack Crawford.

Within twenty minutes, he arrived. Within thirty, the rest of his unit arrived, scouring the place and establishing a perimeter. Will was handcuffed, whisked away in the back of the FBI vehicle where he was deposited in a very familiar room, although this time he was chained to the small cuff on the table rather than speculating how it'd feel. Now, he didn't have to imagine. He was very much the criminal, as far as the FBI was concerned. In truth, he was thankful for the restraints. His eyes burned with the liquid fire that crept through his veins, and he desperately needed an aspirin.

"Where's Abigail, Will," Jack asked, sitting across from him. "You called me, so I can only assume that you want to confess."

"I don't know where Abigail is," said Will, watching his hands. "I called because I'm scared."

"Scared?" Jack prompted curtly.

"I'm being set up, Agent Crawford."

"Set up," Jack repeated, derision clear in his voice. He stood and paced the length of the room at a leisurely stroll; it was an intimidation tactic, one to try and remind the person in question that the FBI would gladly waste their time. Will didn't have the heart to tell Jack that he'd lost so much time, this was nothing. "So you're saying it was a set up that we found the remains of Charlie Yorkman in your barn, as well as human remains in your fishing lures?"

Shock. Shock, shock, shock, shock, shock.

"Yes," he forced himself to say, slow and sure. His headache pulsed, ricocheted across his forehead to nestle deep in his temple. Whatever the doctors had given him, it was long since gone and faded.

"And it's a set up that you came to with the blood of Abigail Hobbs on your hands, in the very place that Garrett Jacob Hobbs and Marissa Schurr died?"

"Hannibal Lecter set me up, Agent Crawford," Will said, and it was the same sort of silence that met him when he first sat across from the FBI and told them about Jared. It was the same silence he'd endured when his father's new personality had run out of things to say,

the same silence that Hannibal had left him with when he called him to cry that he'd killed Nicholas Boyle.

Except he hadn't killed Nicholas Boyle. That was the problem.

"Your therapist set you up," Jack said, a mocking curl to his lip. He rounded on Will and leaned on the table, getting far too close. Will blinked rapidly and looked down, forcing himself to focus on his inhales and his exhales.

"He's not my therapist. He's still in grad school," Will replied. "He killed those people, and he's framing me for it."

"And why would he do a thing like that when he's supposedly helping you get a better grasp on your psyche?" Jack asked, leaning in closer. He was close enough to kiss, to bite. He was close enough to choke, to kill. Behind him, Jared Freeman shook his head to Will, warningly.

Now's not the time.

"Because he wanted to see what I'd do," Will murmured. "He's the sadistic, intelligent psychopath that you've been looking for, not me."

"Oh, and he just…told you this?" Jack waved a hand flippantly. He didn't move away. Will blinked and forced himself to look into his eyes, gritting his teeth at the warning bells in his head, *danger, danger, danger*.

"I figured it out," he whispered. "You kept asking me to get into his head, and when I finally did, I figured out the very thing that you couldn't."

"Or maybe you've just been running a game that finally caught up to you," Jack replied.

"If I was really your guy, do you think I'd have been so careless?" Will asked, and as another wave of heat washed over him, he leaned back. He tried to appear defiant, rebellious; he really, truly did. It was difficult though, when his heart was constricting so tightly that breathing became too labored. He swayed and leaned towards the table, and Jack moved away from him, glaring.

"Even the best of you twisted minds make mistakes. You're just upset that I found out."

"You're just upset," Will managed, leaning forward to press his forehead into his clammy hands, "that the dog you kept sending out to track hunters found one that you're too blind to see."

"We'll tell that to Abigail, then." Jack left him then, and he didn't return. Will figured that it was another mind game, but after the hours drained from him, he realized that out of all of the games to play, it was a very good one. These were not the minutes that slipped from fingers that held too tight; these were the seconds that ticked, ticked, ticked with total

awareness. His mind throbbed with his heartbeat, and his head bobbed as he tried to nod, nod, nod off. They were going to let him die in here. They were going to let him die.

Hannibal was going to let them kill him.

"Hannibal," he murmured, and he shifted in his chair, head buried in his hands. Hannibal, the devil in the shadows. Hannibal, the liar. Hannibal, the puppet master. Hannibal, the murderer.

"He's eating them, you know."

Hannibal the Cannibal. The name had a ring to it, a title rather than a true name. Will laughed into his hands, timing them on the off-beat of the pain that spread from his neck and up, locking him into such a position that his muscles cramped with the effort. The seconds dripped. The seconds froze. He shook his head, to better dispel the illusions of the man that he'd not only been intimate with but practically thrown himself at, desperate for that sort of closeness that you only get to share with someone that saw you when no one else could.

At the thought of Hannibal's hands on him, Will rubbed his hands on the table to try and scrape the essence off of him. He could see them, small brands that marked him as sullied, tainted by the touch of a person that once stood over the corpse of an innocent person and kissed him.

"No," Will said calmly, rubbing his palms on the table. "No."

It was true, though. In the frosted, cool morning, Hannibal had pulled him to his feet, blood spread across their skin, and caressed his face, crooning dark, intoxicating words. Hook, line, and sinker. Will was the worst sort of fisherman, one who couldn't see the lure until it was too late, one that saw the sights of the gun only to find that he was standing in front of the target.

"This isn't real," he whispered, and Garrett Jacob Hobbs sat across from him, bits of flesh hanging, an eye plucked out from where the maggots got to it. He grinned, exposing the chunks of rotten skin that still held on.

"It's real, Will," Hobbs assured him, and he reached across the wrap his hands around Will's throat. "This time, you're not getting out of this alive."

A blue light flashed, and the darkness swallowed him whole.

-

He woke to a lulling, gentle voice. Its cadence was that of an old violin –warm, full-bodied. There was something comforting about it, and dizzying images of a small balcony, just two people and the stars. He opened his eyes, the stark white ceiling above dancing with how it had felt to be so daring to kiss a girl he knew he'd never have.

"What are you reading?" he croaked. He turned his head to look at Alana sitting beside the bed.

“Flannery O’Connor,” she replied, lifting the book up. She looked tired, fine spider web lines around her eyes that attested to a not so restful day. “I loved it so much as a girl that I tried to raise peacocks like she did in the book.”

“I didn’t know that it was legal to own peacocks,” Will said. He focused on her face, on eyes softened with familiarity, rather than the handcuffed wrist that rested in the same view. He jostled his other arm, unsurprised to find that one cuffed as well.

“Oh, it is…it was also completely legal for me to realize how utterly stupid they are.”

“I think that would be something society would take in order to push the ‘beauty isn’t everything’ ideal that’s very popular right now,” said Will, and at her laugh, he smiled, a grimacing, ugly sort of thing. “Not to be rude, since I’ve been informed this is normally a rude question, but have you been crying?”

“Is it that obvious?” Alana asked. She reached up to caress her cheek, an almost self-conscious action.

“Your cheeks are flushed,” he said, “and I’m not so arrogant to think I’m making you blush with the way that I look right now.”

“There may have been some screaming,” Alana admitted. “Maybe some steering wheel hitting, too.”

“Why?”

“…Do you have to ask why, Will?” she inquired gently. He shifted in his bed, staring up at the ceiling pointedly so that he didn’t have to see her eyes again. They were going to make him break.

“I have a scream building,” he said conversationally.

“Do you?”

“Perched just…right under my chin.” He nudged his chin to his chest, as though he could display it to her.

“You should let it out before it explodes out of you. It can sometimes be therapeutic to scream until there’s nothing left,” Alana said.

“I think that if I started, I’m afraid I wouldn’t be able to stop.” He glanced at her and laughed a little, studying her face and the way that even the hospital lights somehow made her glow. She was the grounder, and he was the lightning. He looked back up to the ceiling when her expression shifted, an uncomfortable contortion at the words she was about to say.

“Is this the part you tell me what’s wrong with me?” he asked.

“Will…you’re very sick,” Alana began. Will nodded; that wasn’t news.

“I had my suspicions,” he said sagely.

“You had a seizure at FBI headquarters, and you were brought here. They ran some tests, and you have what’s called encephalitis. It’s an infection that causes severe inflammation in the brain, resulting in lack of spacial awareness, hallucinations, dementia, headaches, and…more often than not, death.”

“Well I haven’t died yet,” Will managed, looking down at the blankets tucked in around him. It was neurological, not mental. He wasn’t insane, he was fucking sick.

But Hannibal knew that.

“Now that they know what it is, they’re going to treat it,” she assured him.

“And…how did you know I had a seizure at the FBI? I didn’t even know I’d had a seizure at the FBI.” He glanced to gauge her reaction, and at the hesitation on her face, he nodded in understanding.

“Hannibal and I were asked to speak with Agent Crawford after your apprehension. Hannibal felt that he had a lot to share with the FBI regarding his concerns.”

“Oh, I’m sure that Hannibal had a gregarious amount of concern,” Will spat, and the handcuffs cut into his wrists as he clenched his fists.

“You told Agent Crawford that Hannibal set you up.”

“That’s because he did. He killed those people, Alana, not me.” She reached out to touch his hand, and he flinched, holding his breath. She gripped it tightly, reassuring.

“I don’t think you killed anyone, Will,” she said. Will nodded, the weight on his back easing slightly. He wasn’t going to be alone. Someone was going to believe him. “At least, I don’t think you remember doing it.”

…Oh.

He exhaled, and he flexed his hand, moving it as far away from her touch as he could. She allowed the withdrawal, and he refused to look up to see the expression she’d hold at the ready for him. Pity. Remorse. A whisper of fear.

“I didn’t kill anyone,” he said. “Hannibal pretended to try and help me with my empathy disorder, and he is trying to frame me for what he did to…to…those people.”

“Hannibal went to Agent Crawford in order to speak up for you. He discussed your time lapses and blackout periods, as well as your hallucinations and delusions. Whatever happened to those people, you don’t remember it.” It was supposed to sound gentle, coaxing. It didn’t. “He said that you had expressed fear of hurting others, and an inability to remember times varying from hours to, at its worst, even days. It was the encephalitis.”

“He may have been speaking for me, but I-” He stopped, teeth dragging over chapped lips furiously. What had his father said? That’s fucking that? What did almost anyone ever do when Will tried to tell them something? The only two people in the world that seemed to

truly *listen*, truly hear what he had to say, were Hannibal and Abigail –one had betrayed him, listened so that he could slither close enough to strike, and the other was –

-No. He refused to believe that he killed her.

"Will, I know this is confusing," Alana said, "but all anyone wants to do is help."

"Jack doesn't want to help, he wants to put someone behind bars," Will spat. The heart monitor picked up tempo.

"And what is it you claim Hannibal wants to do?" Alana inquired.

"He just wants to see what I'll do," Will replied. Alana opened her mouth with something sharp, something biting to *show* Will just how wrong he was, but the door slammed shut as Jack Crawford walked in, and it silenced them both.

"It's good to see you awake, Will," Jack said cheerfully.

"I'm sure you and I have different reasons for being pleased with my consciousness," Will replied grimly. They stared one another down across the short distance.

"I'm not the enemy here, son," Jack stated. Will wanted to fight, to shout. Behind Jack, Jared Freeman pressed a finger to his lips

"Now's not the time to fight. Now's not the time for flight."

"I suppose not," Will said, looking back up to the ceiling. "Is this the part where you read me my rights?"

"Yes."

"I'd like Alana to not be here when you do, if that's alright with you." He rolled his head to look at her, and her expression was enough to almost crack the veneer he'd painted over his face to keep it calm, sanguine.

"I'll respect that," she said slowly.

"…I bet you think you dodged a bullet with me," he whispered, winking.

"I think I still managed to get hit, Will," she replied, standing up. She left the book on the bed for him and excused herself, her heels clicking quietly across the floor until the door closed again and they faded away. Will stared at the door, and he debated letting loose the pressure that'd been building for so long he'd almost gotten used to the pain. If he screamed, would she come running back? If he finally let loose the pent up torture that'd tried to suffocate him, would she finally understand?

He swallowed with difficultly and looked to Jack Crawford, scream firmly tucked underneath his tongue.

“Alright, Will,” Jack said wearily. “You’re under arrest for the murders of Cassie Boyle, Amanda Lyon, Marissa Schurr, Charlie Yorkman, and Abigail Hobbs. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say or do…”

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Time moved. It was not the sleepy, drooping time that left him screaming into his hands, huddled in the darkest corner of his cell –no, that came at night when the nightmares were so tangible that he woke with the taste of Abigail’s flesh stuck in his teeth. That brought orderlies, needles, and a silence so bleak it cut underneath his grief and reminded him that no matter how low he was, there was still so much to lose. That taught him to better hide his nightmares. That taught him that even in your most terrifying moments, the worst thing you can do is scream.

In every other aspect though, time blurred. There were mug shots, fingerprints, lawyers, analysis, and therapy to endure. There was talk of trials, of life sentences, of death row and other nasty things that wriggled deep and bred like maggots. Those things spun in a dizzying array, and he found recalling them after was like trying to pick up singular grains of sand. He was guilty, they said, but he just can’t remember it. He was sick, they said, and it’s not his fault he ate that girl.

At least Freddie Lounds was part of the parade of monkeys, too. Someone’s career had to take off in the wake of his demise, after all. When he was sentenced, she all but leapt over the partition, snapped a photo of his bleak expression, then exited the room with a smug, self-satisfied smile.

The only moment, the only time that moved at its normal pace, was the one meeting he had with Hannibal.

“What are you looking at, Will Graham?” Will turned towards the cell door, having been facing the corner for a time –an hour? A minute? Time wasn’t real when the walls barely changed, and since he’d been placed in the cell, the walls rarely changed. He blinked, stared at Hannibal, and the fury that seemed to constantly churn within him boiled. He blinked, and the stag man stood tall and mighty, horns rising towards the ceiling. He blinked again, and Hannibal clasped his hands behind his back, expression placidly polite.

“I was in my head,” he said. His voice was gravel from disuse, although it’d only been a few weeks –months? Days?

“What were you thinking of, if you don’t mind my asking?” Will knew what Hannibal wanted to hear. He’d not kept quiet of his accusations, enough that one of the orderlies threatened to sedate him if he didn’t shut up. He avoided that orderly, when at all possible. In his lost days of silence suspended on the dust in the air, he labored over his thoughts of Hannibal, of how now that he could <u>see</u> him, he could step into his place as easily as one breathed. He knew what Hannibal wanted to hear. He knew what he wanted to see.

“Fishing,” said Will. Just that the edge of Hannibal’s eye, it tightened briefly, a shift of disappointment.

“Good,” Jared Freeman coached him, strolling to the bars to size Hannibal up. “Let him know you’re not going to give him a second thought.”

“Do you miss fishing with your friend Charlie?” Hannibal asked. It was taunting, jabbing. Will’s jaw clenched, and he had to fight to keep himself from lunging, from throwing himself against the bars where he’d maybe get a piece of him. He forced himself to swallow, to turn fully so that he could face Hannibal head-on.

“I keep being told what I do or do not remember, so I can’t say that I ever knew a Charlie,” he managed.

“No one disputes the memories that you do have, just the blank spaces in between.” Will nodded, accepting this. It wasn’t true, of course; when he’d tried to talk about Hannibal’s physical advances, the defense lawyer at one point advised against even thinking about it. No one would believe it, for one, and two, they weren’t prosecuting Hannibal, so his actions done in the privacy of his own house was none of their business.

“I didn’t put those blank spaces in there,” he murmured.

“No, the encephalitis did. The Warden here tells me he’s going to do his best to retrieve them for you.” Hannibal looked neither displeased nor ruffled at the thought. Will rocked back on his heels and turned, facing his bed.

“They’re trying to fill those spots with things I supposedly did.”

“And what are you trying to fill those spaces with?” Hannibal wondered.

“The truth.”

“The truth is a dangerous thing, Will.”

“I hear you in my head, Hannibal,” he said, and Jared turned back to him.

“Not the plan,” Jared cajoled. “You’re supposed to make him feel inferior and unimportant, not smug. Don’t tell him you hear his voice, idiot.”

“What do I say when I’m within the walls of your mind?” Hannibal asked curiously. Will tucked his hands into the pockets of his jumpsuit, shrugging.

“You are my inner voice,” he said pleasantly. “I used to hear my thoughts as my own –in my voice, with the same timbre and inflection as I would sound as I speak to you here. But now, my inner voice is you, and you’re so very, very persuasive.”

“What do I persuade you to do when I speak?” Hannibal inquired softly.

“You persuade me to indulge in my darkness. You justify my actions for me and twist my words until I hang onto everything that falls from your mouth because I trusted you to not lead me astray.”

“Do you feel like you’ve been led astray by your inner voice, Will?”

“Oh yes,” Will hissed, and he took a deliberate step closer. “I once thought that to have a voice of such surety and clarity would be nice, for once. Now, I want to claw it from my head with my bare hands.”

“Would you place it before me, the same way you place the blame for the unfortunate circumstances that led you here?” Hannibal didn’t move away when Will drew closer. He seemed to hum with the action, coming alive at the thought that he’d gotten under Will’s skin.

“Way off base from the plan,” Jared sneered, leaning against the bars. “You should let me handle this, monster to monster.”

“I would destroy it, that no one else suffered from it.”

“Everything I have done, Will, has been for your well-being. I’m sorry that your fear of your reality has caused you to think of me as your enemy, but I still see us as close friends.”

“We’re not friends,” Will whispered, wrapping his hands around the bars. “We’re not friends, nor have we ever been friends. That light would not touch us, even for a thousand years.”

“And so you would hate me rather than see that I’ve only wanted what was best for you?” Hannibal asked. He stepped closer, dipping his head down to stare Will in the eyes. “If you really thought of me as capable of such monstrosity, why declare your disgust so passionately?”

“Because I want you to know that I’m going to get out of here,” Will growled. “I’m going to get out of here, and when I do, I’m going to destroy you.”

“With your trial coming up, that sort of confidence is key. With your emotions as they are, though, would destroying me truly make you happy? Is that the only way you can be at peace?”

“It’s not peace I’m searching for anymore; it’s a reckoning.”

And in the face of a life sentence for multiple murders while in an unconscious state, that’s really all that Will could hold onto while time spun out from under him.

There would be a reckoning. Will Graham would make sure of that.

Chapter End Notes

Well...this is the end. :)

I hope you guys enjoyed it! I do have a sequel planned, but I am still in the works of outlining it. It could take awhile to have posted on here, as I do want to take my time.

Things get kind of wild in it (if things aren't considered wild enough in this one!)

Thank you so much for all of your support and kindness. This is my first Hannigram fic that I started up, and I'm so happy where it's gone. This has been more of a 'novel' sort of writing --if that makes any sense. I wrote it as though it were more of a book than a fanfic. Definitely a lot of world building in its own way!

In the meantime, I think most of you already know about the other fics I have in the works/am currently wrapping up: Dread and Hunger (just finished), The Fault in My Code (about to finish), The Unquiet Grave (3 chapters in), and Ill Intentions (just started!). Check them out if you haven't already, or just wait for the sequel! :) I'm not sure yet what I'm going to call it. Magnum Opus kind of was supposed to be it's own thing like Dread and Hunger was, but after about halfway, I realized it wasn't quite built with that in mind.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!